MR. AND MRS. VILLIERS

HUBERT WALES

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BY

HUBERT WALES

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The Tree of Knowledge

By

A Woman

There could be no excuse for giving to the world this diary of disillusion but the fact that it is a record of actual experience.

Both the professed critic and the amateur of letters will recognise that no one could have written so vivid a log of a shipwrecked life but the woman who had lived it. No one but Marie Bashkirtseff could have given us the famous "Journal." Here we have a self-revelation even more valuable to the psychologist. Marie Bashkirtseff's existence was a series of poses. She posed to herself even more than to others. The woman who dissects her soul in these vibrant pages is, so far as can be judged, entirely frank.

This is not her only merit, for her delight in the color and flexibility of language lends an exotic charm which, like the scent of orchids, fatigues and delights the sense. Here we have set naked before us the nature of a woman steeped in the poisonous juices that distil from the fruit of the Tree of

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Knowledge. She is abnormal, a decadent, a "sport," even. Yet she represents only the extreme of a type of women which the conditions of the age tend to produce. Her motto is the motto of Magda, *Io sono io;* her desires, Pleasure and Experience, if possible, combined. Seeing that she has no standards of right and wrong, it would be inaccurate to call her immoral. She is literally non-moral. Morality is to her nothing but a convention; Religion, merely a frame of mind.

Her diary is "not for little people nor for fools." It is a document to be studied with scientific curiosity by those whose interest lies in sounding the hidden depths of human character. Women will understand the writer best—those, at any rate, who understand themselves. These will judge her less harshly than men.

READY MAY FIRST

The Tree of Knowledge

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FOREWORD

The enthusiastic reception accorded THE YOKE *augurs well for the immediate popularity of* MR. AND MRS. VILLIERS.

In this story, as in THE YOKE, *certain phases of the sex-problem are considered: difficulties not infrequently encountered in the married state.*

Man is naturally the aggressor in the connubial relations. His desires and passions are more positive than woman's. Women of unusual mental and physical charms are often found renitent and lacking in the disposition which makes for perfect conjugal happiness. Such women have little difficulty in marrying, although entirely unfitted for the marriage relation. Mrs Villiers is a woman of this type.

The story is a fair and legitimate study of opposite temperaments. It is intensely realistic, and the difficult problem, which is by no means rare in real life, has been handled with dignity and with such restraint as not to offend.

FRANKLIN FOSTER.

Mr and Mrs Villiers

CHAPTER I

Mr and Mrs Norman Villiers had come to be regarded by their neighbours at Weybridge, and by their relatives and acquaintance in other parts of the world, as a couple who found the path of matrimony unusually free from thorns. Without being given to effusive displays of tenderness, their demeanour one to the other was always kindly affectionate, their mutual conversation always courteous and charged with quiet esteem. Not the most intimate of their friends could point to an instance of any domestic jar which had served, even momentarily, to interrupt the easy flow of their conjugal intercourse.

This general estimate, for all that, was far indeed from reaching the truth. A rift had separated them on the day of their marriage—a rift unsuspected even by Marjorie Villiers herself. It had

widened and continued to widen, month on month and year on year, until, at the time when we make their acquaintance, it had become a fissure, which yawned between them, deep, broad, and hardly to be bridged.

The existence of this secret cause of disunion had been kept by Norman Villiers, during the eight years of his marriage, closely locked within his own soul. He was a man from whose appearance the possession of this quality of reserve, even in a marked degree, would have been supposed. Not that he was morose, or peculiarly imperturbable; his clean-shaven face merely indicated complete self-reliance. Other points in his general aspect distinguished him from his fellows. He was thirty-five, tall, and proportionately muscular, by no means ill-looking, but, as we see him sitting in his study one evening in late October, somewhat unkempt and untidy. He was wearing morning dress though he had dined some hours previously, his shirt-cuffs and his trousers were both slightly frayed at the edges, and his black hair was too long and insufficiently brushed. The assured searching light in his eyes indicated an intellectual man; the papers on the desk beside him particular-

ised a literary one. He had begun life as a journalist, but had drifted latterly into the calmer waters of creative work. The success of his first novel had been mainly responsible for the change; the two others which had subsequently issued from his pen, without achieving the brilliant results he had possibly hoped for, had done much to establish him on a firm basis in the public favour.

To-night, however, he was not writing. He had drawn a low chair before the fire and was seated in it, smoking and staring into the blaze. As he finished a cigar, he threw the stump into the grate and took another from a box beside him, without apparently being conscious of his act. Norman Villiers, indeed, had come to a crisis in his life; his thoughts were far from his bodily surroundings. Not that he was now engaged in the throes of mental conflict, debating the chances of two divergent paths. That was over: his Rubicon was crossed, though his boats remained still intact behind him. He had no thoughts of returning, however. A decision once formed, his principle was to abide by it rigidly. He was merely waiting to continue his march and to watch the issue.

As he smoked, he was dimly conscious of certain

familiar sounds in the house. Someone passed the door with a tray and returned; he heard a slight jingle of silver as a maid carried the table plate upstairs. Then came a short period of silence, to be followed by the rasp and jar of closing windows and a subdued murmur of voices as the servants ascended the stairs on their way to bed. A longer pause succeeded. It seemed longer than it really was to Villiers; for though he did not stir from his easy position before the fire, and kept a cigar still wedged between his lips, he was now listening intently for the sound which would terminate it. It came as the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to eleven. The drawing-room door opened and shut, and a skirt rustled across the hall. The next moment his wife looked into the room. She held some books in her hand and had gathered up the front of her dress to go upstairs. "Don't be late, dear," she said almost mechanically; and he answered, without turning his head, as he had answered—no more falsely—a hundred times before, "No, dear"; and then the door closed and the skirt rustled away again. A very simple incident; but it was sufficient to bring a lump into Norman's throat and to strike deep at the foundation of the

resolve he had believed so impregnably established. For the brief moment that his wife had remained in the room the future course of his life and hers had hung in the balance.

You would not have remarked on his face any sign of the severe mental struggle he had passed through. It still retained the same thoughtful, almost rapt, expression as he gazed into the flames. He waited calmly until he heard a bedroom door click on the floor above, then he threw the remains of his last cigar into the fire and rose from his seat. He went round the house, extinguished all the lights that were still burning, and returned to the study. A spirit-stand stood upon a small table, and from this he carefully mixed himself a glass of weak whisky-and-water, which he placed upon his desk. He was actuated more by habit than inclination; his use of alcohol was of the slightest, and often he worked through the small hours to find his modicum still untasted at the end. Having seated himself at the desk, he collected the litter of papers upon it and placed them in a neat heap at the side; then he turned up the lamp, took out a clean sheet and began to write on it in pencil. Apparently he found his task a difficult one, for

he wrote slowly and with frequent erasures and interlineations. Once, with a slight indication of irritability, he scrawled out the entire jumble of lines and began again beneath them. It occupied him two hours to complete a draft to his satisfaction. At the end of that time he had filled three sheets of sermon-paper with close pencilled lines. He took a turn about the room with the paper in his hand, and then sat down once more and made a fair copy of it in ink. This he placed in an envelope, sealed, and addressed to his wife.

His task finished, he returned to his place by the fire, and stirred the dying embers into a blaze. He remained long leaning over it, mechanically prodding the charred coals, deeply lost in thought. The flames, as they flickered and fell, threw his features into relief. They were difficult to read. There was intellect in the brow, gentleness in the eyes, dignity in the nose, but something in the slightly accentuated lips which served in a measure to mar the harmony of the whole. An observer who might have been watching him as he sat would have known that he saw a capable man, he would have known that he saw a benevolent and a just man; whether he saw a completely good man

he would have been left in doubt. Presently he rose and cautiously opened the door, throwing a stream of yellow light into the hall. He listened intently for a few moments, and then picked up the letter he had written and took it into the dining-room. He dropped it in a prominent position on the mantelpiece. As he re-crossed the hall to the study a small clock on a cabinet tinkled twice.

The lateness of the hour appeared to surprise him, and henceforth his movements quickened. Going to the front door, he opened it and looked out. It was a clammy night; heavy banks of cloud rolled slowly and incessantly over a glimmering moon; a slight breeze was moving, and a feel of impending rain was in the air. Apparently satisfied by his survey, Villiers presently re-entered his room and proceeded to an examination of his bookshelves. After some hesitation, he selected several volumes and carried them out of the house and along one of the grass margins which bordered the path, eventually depositing them beside the gate. He went back for a second load, and then for another and another. It took him some time to make a selection for this purpose, but his move-

ments throughout were swift and noiseless. In due course there were three tall piles standing by the gate. Villiers assured himself that they were sufficiently hidden from the eyes of any belated pedestrian by a screen of shrub, and then returned finally to the house and closed the door behind him.

It was now three o'clock, but his night's work was still far from complete. He removed his shoes and stealthily ascended to the dressing-room where he slept. Here he packed a bag with some clothes, and a few minutes later emerged again upon the corridor. The house was completely still; even the slight ticking of the hall clock was now too distant to break the silence. He listened some moments at the door of a neighbouring room, and then, with the utmost caution, turned the handle and went in. It was faintly illumined by a shaded night-light. At the further end two little girls of six and seven were asleep in two little cribs. Villiers lighted a candle and carried it towards them, screening the flame with his hand. As the beam fell over the beds they stirred slightly, but did not awake. He stood long watching them, listening to their even breathing. One lay with a small,

soft arm outside the bed-clothes. This he gently covered, and then kissed them each in turn without breaking their sleep. A door communicating with an adjoining apartment was near the cribs and stood ajar. Norman looked at this and moved a step towards it, then hesitated, and finally turned and went out by the same at which he had entered. He extinguished the candle and descended once more to the ground floor, carrying his bag.

Entering one of the front rooms, he drew aside the window-blind and stood for some moments looking out. The signs of increasing restless anxiety were beginning to manifest themselves upon his usually calm face. His ears were straining to catch some expected sound, and this caused him to start at the smallest interruption of the universal silence—the creak of a piece of furniture, the fall of a cinder in the hearth. He glanced repeatedly at the clock on the mantelpiece, and paced the room at intervals with stealthy but uneasy tread, biting his underlip till the blood showed beneath the skin. A little after four the noise for which he was waiting broke into the stillness. A rumble of wheels became audible in the distance, and presently a closed fly drew up at the gate.

Villiers put on his hat and overcoat, and, taking his bag, went quietly out of the house, closing the door with a latch-key to avoid a jar. He assisted the driver to pack the books inside the vehicle. Then he placed his bag upon the top of them and seated himself in the small space that still remained. These preparations occupied but a very few minutes. The coachman was apparently aware of his destination, for he closed the door without speaking to Villiers, and mounting the box, wrapped a horse-rug about his knees and started on his journey. The wheels crunched loudly on the heavy road, then slowly creaked and rumbled into the distance and died away. The breeze blew fitfully, the moon still gleamed through drifting cloud, and beneath it, darkly outlined, lay the sleeping house, all unconscious that its master had left it and would not return.

CHAPTER II

THE next morning dawned misty and overcast. Marjorie Villiers looked from her window, as she dressed, upon sodden patches of garden, dripping with condensing vapour. Possibly the cheerless scene affected her spirits; at any rate, there was observable in her manner, as she moved to and fro, some sign of irritability. One of the children in the adjoining room was resenting its nurse's ministrations, and occasionally burst in upon her with a petulant complaint, which served further to ruffle her equanimity. The child was chidden and sent away; then recalled and kissed; to be chided again; and again forgiven on a subsequent outbreak. These interruptions prolonged her toilet beyond its usual limits, so that it was considerably after half-past eight when she finally descended the stairs.

Though approaching thirty, she retained the tall, slim figure of her girlhood. A soft, oval face and deep, dark eyes indicated a loving and lovable dis-

position, an indication so strongly marked as to clothe her aspect of itself with a peculiar charm. No stranger, on seeing her for the first time, would have pronounced her a pretty woman, or even have admitted the fact on its being suggested to him; for somehow she failed to make the most of the attractions she undoubtedly possessed. Her dark-brown hair was drawn loosely back from her forehead without wave or curl; her grey morning gown was of the simplest workmanship and material. Unaffected, quietly religious, both by nature and training, she gave small thought to human artifices to improve the handiwork of her Maker. Nevertheless, her features, if a trifle pointed, were good ones; her form, though slightly inclined to stoop, graceful and elegant. Many a woman with fewer natural advantages has gained a reputation for beauty.

When she entered the dining-room, the two children were already seated at their breakfast. Her husband's absence caused her no surprise; it was his custom to take his morning meal at a later hour than the rest of the family. She took in at a glance the arrangements which had been made to satisfy the bodily needs of her offspring.

"Sybil," she exclaimed sharply to the younger, "why are you eating sausage? You know you are not allowed it. Nurse, why has Miss Sybil been given sausage?"

The nurse's reply was inarticulate, but apparently expostulatory, and she was summarily dismissed. Marjorie, with her own hands, removed the offending delicacy, opened an egg and placed it in front of Sybil, dried her protesting tears, and at last seated herself behind the coffee-pot and took up her letters. As she did so, she glanced automatically at the clock on the mantelpiece. Her attention was at once arrested by the note which stood there. She recognised her husband's handwriting, and a look of perplexity, of incredulity came into her face, changing slowly to vague alarm, and then to definite dread. She sprang quickly from her seat, snatched at the letter and tore open the envelope with trembling fingers. She read the opening lines, and could read no more. Her whole frame quivered, her lips uttered a half-choked cry of pain, and she clutched at the nearest object for support. Her face had blanched and her eyes held a look of mute anguish.

The two children had ceased eating and were

gazing at her with solemn surprise. They knew well enough that something was wrong, and presently one of them slipped from her chair and ran to the object of her concern. She wrapped her tiny arms as far as they would go around her skirts and clung to her appealingly.

"Mummy! mummy!" she cried, "kiss me." It was the only means which her childish intelligence suggested to bring back to the familiar features their natural look.

Marjorie took no notice at first, but, after a time, the child's repeated calls and plaintive appeals to be kissed broke a way into her brain and reawakened her numbed faculties. She smoothed, half mechanically, the glossy curls, and then stooped and kissed the little upturned anxious face.

"Go and sit down, darling," she said. "Mother is not very well. Nurse shall give you your breakfast."

She recalled the nurse, and giving the children into her charge, went into an adjoining room. This was Norman's study. The fire had been lighted for him; his newspaper was placed upon the table; even his boots, glossily polished, stood near his favourite chair. Marjorie had a sudden wild hope

that, somehow, the letter was a mistake, a hoax, that presently he would come down the stairs and greet her with his customary morning kiss and hasty, kindly word. The next moment her glance fell on the depleted book-shelves, and the little beam faded before it had warmed her. She sat down, spread out the letter upon the desk at which it had been written, and forced herself to read it from the first word to the last. Its contents were these:

"My Dear Marjorie,—I use no more intimate form of address, not because I think of you less affectionately than I have always done, but because, in the light of what I am going to write, it would seem an impertinence which you would have a right to resent. Before you read this I shall have left you—slunk away like a coward in the night. The fact that I am able to do so will, I hope, convince you how little there is to regret in my worthless bones.

"I am going because I find it no longer possible to endure life in the conditions which you have tacitly laid down. We have been married eight years, but during that time, except in a very im-

perfect sense in the early years, we have not been man and wife. We have lived in complete physical disunion. Of late I have rarely referred to the subject: it is one which was clearly distasteful to you, and I was unwilling to wound your delicacy. So it is possible that you may have grown into the belief that our mode of life was as acceptable to me as it was to yourself. It has not been so. Do not think I am seeking to blame you. It is a difference of temperament, of constitution, of what you will. You have been made in one mould and I in another, and they are both extremes. I think, dear, you are very little lower than the angels, as I am hardly higher than the beasts. Mentally and morally you are the best helpmeet a man could have; physically you could never mate with such as I am. No one could wish for a sister, a friend, more sweet, more unselfish, more continually thoughtful and long-suffering. As such, I esteem you, I reverence you, I admire you; as such, if you will believe me, Marjorie, I love you. But the animal remains in me and will not be quelled. I do not need a sister, a friend, a housekeeper; I need a wife, and *a wife I must and will have.*

"Perhaps you are thinking that, at least, I could

have told you all this before taking an irrevocable step. You may feel that, in that case, you would have promised to be to me such as I desired. It would have been useless. You cannot alter your nature, dear. It was given you for some other end than wifehood, some higher end. I do not doubt that, at any time during our marriage, under pressure, out of kindness of heart and your affection, you would have sacrificed yourself to my wishes. It is a sacrifice I would accept from no woman, least of all from you.

"What more need I say? Until recently I have been faithful to you. Accident made me so: I encountered no opportunity to be otherwise. When the opportunity came, I took it, as a starving man takes meat. To that food I return; I could refrain no more than a hungry beggar for whom a banquet is prepared. I do not think you will despise me for this, as I deserve to be despised; I think you will blame yourself, who are unblamable. But, as time passes, I hope you will be able to forget the very mortal piece of clay to whom you were canonically joined. I shall not forget you. I shall remember you always as the purest and most perfect of God's creatures I have ever known or can

know. As long as I live, the thought of you will be to me an elevating and ennobling influence, a sheet-anchor to save me from drifting utterly in the waters of human folly.

"You know, of course, that the action I am taking entitles you to a divorce, or will do so at the expiration of some legal period. If you decide to apply for it, the suit will not be defended. This will enable you to obtain your freedom with a minimum of publicity.

"I am going to enclose you a cheque for £250, and to pay a similar sum into your account every six months while you remain my wife. This, with your own means, will permit you to live as you have done hitherto.

"Forget me, Marjorie. I am unworthy an instant's thought, a moment's pain. Only give me credit for sincerity when I say that I am still, no less than of yore, your affectionate husband,

"NORMAN VILLIERS."

Marjorie folded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and hid it in her bosom. Her heart was brimming, but as yet she refused to permit it to run over. There was an appearance to be maintained,

cost her what it might. She left the room without looking to right or left. She dared not trust herself to glance at any one of the familiar objects it contained. The papers on the desk, the pens, the jar of tobacco, the boots waiting for their owner, would have spoken with an eloquence too great for her fortitude. She entered the room where the children were finishing breakfast, spoke kindly to them, replied to their clamorous speeches, and told the nurse she must see them warmly clad before they went out into the raw atmosphere. Afterwards she visited the kitchen and gave her customary household directions.

When all this had been accomplished with stoical calmness, she went upstairs to her room. The maid who was dusting it came out as she entered. Marjorie gave her some instructions which would occupy her elsewhere, and closed the door. Then, at last, she cast herself upon the bed and burst into an overwhelming flood of heart-drawn tears. Her whole frame was racked and shaken by the power of the deep sorrow that convulsed her. After a time the violence of this first outburst spent itself, and then, for over an hour, she continued to weep softly, her face hidden in the pillow. Her trouble

had come upon her with such stunning, blinding suddenness! She found it hardly possible at first to realise all that it meant. She had grown so accustomed to her quiet life with Norman, to his constant presence in the house—as a buttress to take the brunt of her little vexations and to share the weight of her little anxieties, that now she remembered almost with a shock of surprise that this was her husband, her lover, the man into whose keeping she had given her heart—aye, and who would keep it, whatever betode, while it beat within her. He had somehow become strangely different to her eyes since first he had sought her love; but, as she lay sobbing quietly on the bed, the later mechanical life was obliterated and the memory of these early days gushed warm from her heart: how her pulse had quickened at the sound of his footsteps; how she had avoided him because there was none whose company she so much desired; how, when he entered a room which she shared with others, she knew, though he never glanced her way, that he had instantly recognised her presence and was thinking only of her; how at last, when she was quite, quite sure of her place in his thoughts, she had looked into his face and permitted her eyes to tell

their tale. And this it was who was gone; not the buttress, not the quiet man of letters, but her early love, her heart's desire, the most precious possession that the world held for her. And at the gaping desolateness of that thought, the warm tears flooded afresh incontrollably, and she strained the wet pillow to her face with a long, low cry of immeasurable tribulation.

Her sharpest pang came from the belief she felt in her own entire culpability. She did not for an instant question the force of every word which Norman had written. He had left her because she had failed in her duty as a wife, because she had proved herself insufficient, because—and this distracted her sorely, for the apparent divine injustice—she lacked the power to be sufficient. Her own loss was not the worst of the results which followed: that she had deserved, that she would bear, though her heart bled without ceasing. What harrowed her, what pointed the needles of self-reproof with torturing keenness was the thought that by her failure she had driven him into evil: the deadly fear that this first step, by removing him from every straightening influence, might lead him

to further extravagance and end in his ruin—physical, moral, and eternal.

One little ray of hope there was to comfort her. That was the sentence in Norman's letter in which he said that the remembrance of her would save him from "drifting utterly." She rested in its warmth, and after a time it brought her some relief from the pain of her self-chastisement. Her deep sobs slowly ceased, and then she rose from the bed and sank on her knees beside it. She prayed to her Maker, as rarely ever she had prayed before, that the husband whom she loved, and who had gone from her, might be saved from utter drifting.

CHAPTER III

When Marjorie rose from her knees she was again composed, and, moreover, had decided upon the immediate course of action she would take. She bathed her swollen eyes, and presently pinned a neat hat on her head, adding a veil to hide the still evident traces of her recent outbreak of weeping. A jacket and gloves were next put on, a small railway time-table was consulted, various drawers were unlocked and locked again, various small articles disposed in their places within them, and thus finally prepared for a short journey, she left the room and descended to the ground floor.

She informed the servants that their master had left home and would not return for the present, and that she herself was going to town. Then she went out of the house and walked to the station, nodding with her accustomed quiet courtesy to such of her neighbours as chanced to meet her in the road. She took a return ticket for Waterloo, and en-

tered a train which presently arrived, seating herself in a corner of an empty compartment. Crushed and stunned by the blow she had sustained, she felt the need, as she had rarely felt it before, of human sympathy and support. Her parents were both dead, but she was not, fortunately, without those to whom she could apply in her extremity. Her only sister had married, years before, a flourishing City man, and now occupied a substantial mansion in Hampstead. To this house Marjorie drove on her arrival at Waterloo.

She paid off the cab at the door and rang the bell. Mrs Baker was in. Mrs Baker was, in fact, lunching, and Marjorie entered her presence without the formality of announcement. Marion Baker was four years older than her sister, not quite so tall, but more symmetrically proportioned, and without the occasional droop that characterised Marjorie; a sensible and thoroughly capable woman, with a sweet disposition and attractive exterior. She was distinguished by a native harmony of manner which instantly charmed: no one could fail to be struck by the unstudied elegance and grace of all her movements. She possessed the rare faculty of dressing well without giving the impres-

sion that her clothes had received elaborate care in the preparation. Though they always became her, they were never glaringly new. As she came to meet Marjorie, there was genuine surprised joy at the unexpected visit both in her voice and her smile.

"Marjorie!" she exclaimed. "How sweet of you! I was just beginning to wonder whether starvation or a solitary lunch were preferable?"

Marjorie did not speak. She went quickly up to her sister and put both her hands into those which the latter had extended.

"Something is wrong? Something has happened?" said Marion, as she kissed her. Her concern was manifest in the changed tone.

"Yes, dear."

"What is it?"

Marjorie found the sympathetic touch of her sister's encircling arms almost too great for her hardly regained composure. She waited before replying: "It is about Norman," she said.

"He is ill—dead?" Acute alarm was in the sudden query.

"No, dear."

Marion breathed a sigh of relief. "Then the worst is light in that case. Tell me, dear."

"He has left me," said Marjorie, simply.

The elder woman made no immediate comment. Her gaze was fixed thoughtfully on the other's face. "I hardly understand you," she said, at last. "It seems incredible. Come and sit down. You are looking so thin and pale, child. Drink some wine." She hastily poured out a glass from a decanter. "What did you have for breakfast? Nothing? I thought so. You must eat a good lunch, and not another word about Norman until it is finished. Afterwards we will go upstairs and talk."

Marjorie had no appetite, but she allowed herself to be persuaded by her sister to swallow the food she was so sadly in need of. It did her good; a faint tinge of colour came into her cheeks; and presently she was permitted by her hostess to consider the meal at an end. They left the table and went into a small room on the second floor which Marion used partly as a workroom and partly as a boudoir. There was an air of comfort over all it contained, from the cheerful blaze on the hearth to the scattered needlework and knick-knacks.

They seated themselves in two low chairs before the fire. Marion took her sister's hand.

"There, dear," she said, "you look better now. I was afraid you were going to faint. Now tell me about Norman. What do you mean when you say he has left you?"

"I mean he has gone away," replied Marjorie, "and doesn't intend to return, and he says I can get a divorce."

"But when did he go? And how do you know he won't return?"

"He told me so in a letter he left on the mantelpiece." Marjorie spoke quietly, almost as if she were repeating a lesson. "He went last night. I spoke to him on my way to bed, and he answered as usual, but when I came down this morning he was gone."

"But there must be something more," urged Marion. She waited with judicial calmness for the end of the story before committing herself to an opinion upon it. "Did he say nothing else? You always seemed to get on so well. Did he give no reason for leaving you in this extraordinary way?"

"Yes," said Marjorie, in a low tone, "he did."

Her sister waited for the sequel, but as the pause

remained unbroken, she interjected quietly, "Well, dear?"

"I hardly know how to tell you," said Marjorie.

The elder woman looked at her with sudden surprise in her calm eyes. "Why, Marjorie, you have no confession to make, surely?"

"Oh, no."

"Then it shouldn't be hard to tell."

"It is—very."

"Will you show me the letter?"

"Oh, no, no!"

"Then you must contrive to make me understand, dear, somehow. I won't be dull."

Marjorie twisted the rings on her sister's fingers. She found it sorely difficult to frame a set of words for her purpose. "You remember, Marion," she said at last, speaking slowly, "that for the last six years Norman and I have had different rooms?"

"Is it so long as that?" said Marion. Again she waited; again there was a pause, which she was obliged to break. "Yes, dear; go on."

"That is the reason," said Marjorie.

Marion understood. She saw her sister's trouble, but did not shock her by a blunt announcement of her knowledge. Now, however, that the clue was

in her hands, she quickly extracted the remaining threads.

"Which of you first suggested living in that way?" she asked.

"Neither, I think," said Marjorie. "We drifted into it. It suited me, and I thought it suited him."

"Really, it didn't?"

"I know now that it didn't."

"But, surely, you must have known before? Did he never mention it?"

"He used to—sometimes."

"And you refused?"

"I left the subject."

The facts were out, and Marion summed up with judicial impartiality. "You made him live without you for six years, when all the time he was pining for the wife he had married?"

Marjorie made no attempt at extenuation. "Yes," she said, humbly, hardly above her breath.

"You were very thoughtless, Marjorie; you were almost cruel."

The words were expected, and yet they made their object wince slightly when they fell. "I know," she said simply. "You can't reproach me more than I reproach myself. I am worse than

cruel: I have driven him into wickedness, and his sins must rest upon me."

"No," said Marion, quietly; "you were to blame for the manner in which you treated Norman, but nothing could justify his leaving you as he did. Why, if he objected to the kind of life he was leading, didn't he come and tell you so?"

"He said that I couldn't become different at will, that we were made in opposite moulds; and, besides, he wouldn't mention a subject which he knew I disliked."

Marion's serene face lighted in a sudden smile of amusement. "Oh, my dear Marjorie, you can't put forward such an excuse as that. He was your husband, and we must allow our husbands a little more license than other people, poor creatures; they are so very human."

"I can't," said Marjorie, firmly. "The least allusion to horrid, low kind of things makes me feel as if a snake were creeping down my back."

There was no mistaking the genuineness of the sentiment she expressed. Its truth vibrated through every word she uttered and startled even her sister.

The latter watched her some moments in

thoughtful silence. "Marjorie, you had no right to marry," she affirmed at last.

"But I loved him," said Marjorie, with surprised expostulation.

Her ultra-delicacy, viewed in the light of the consequences to which it had led, was slightly irritating to Marion. She was purposely less careful than before to save her sister's susceptibilities. "Yes," she answered, a little tartly, "but husbands won't live on love; they are much too mortal."

The slight rebuke took Marjorie by surprise. Her fortitude was as yet too insecurely established to meet an unexpected demand upon it. She bowed her head, and the tears began to fall softly on her lap.

Marion took her hand again and gently stroked it. "Don't cry, dear," she said, kindly; "I didn't intend to be harsh. When you married, our mother was dead, and I was too inexperienced to be of much use to you, so you had no one to talk to you. You made mistakes, as you could hardly help doing, and you have had to pay a heavy price for them. We must see that you are better prepared for the future," she went on, cheerily, "when this trouble is all over and you can make a new

start. I don't think it can be long before that happens; two such good people were not put into the world to quarrel."

She waited until her sister's tears ceased to fall, and then proceeded: "You must have noticed, sometimes, couples who appear to go on living in a perpetual honeymoon, whose original feelings for one another—what is the verse?—'Time cannot stale, nor custom wither'? You have seen such marriages, Marjorie?"

"Oh, yes," answered Marjorie. She was dabbing her eyes with a small cambric handkerchief. "Yours with James is one; I have often thought so."

Marion blushed slightly. "I was not thinking of that," she said. "Because I was going to say next that the wives in such cases are wise women who know that their happiness will not be achieved by concealing their natural infirmities in the foolish belief that insensibility is virtue. The most virtuous woman is one who is exceedingly sensible, but who has fought and overcome herself. For those who have been through that fire and come out unscathed there is no honour too high. But they are necessarily not wives. A wife's business, if she is wise, is to retain her husband's love and

to keep at bay the quiet affection into which it so often degenerates."

"Why keep it at bay?" asked Marjorie. "If it is true affection, it is enough."

"It is not enough," said Marion, "as your own case has proved. A great many pretty things have been said and written about love being everlasting and unchanging and so on. So it is, perhaps, in the sleepy, unemotional stage, but in that stage it is always dangerous—a loose rope that may stand a strain or may not. You must keep the flame bright enough to forge steel links. But a flame needs to be constantly fed. The fuel by which it burns at first is not inexhaustible, and unless it is replenished and kept replenished, the fire will go out."

"I think I know what you mean," said Marjorie, without looking up.

"Man is a difficult cattle to deal with," proceeded Marion. "He won't be beholden. If, as has happened in your case, there is nothing to give him except out of charity, don't let him know it. Humour him. You will be amply repaid, Marjorie."

Marjorie shivered a little. "That would be like acting a lie," she said.

"Would the reverse be acting a lie? When you first fell in love with Norman, did you show him your true feelings, or did you do all you could to appear indifferent?"

Marjorie's pale face broke into a half smile. "Two blacks don't make a white, dear."

"How can we satisfy this little tyrant of a conscience?" said Marion, with a quaint air of forbearance. "Look at the case in another way. Is it better that Norman should receive the feigned endearments of his wife or the real ones of another woman?"

The shaft struck home. Marjorie clasped her two hands tightly together and bent towards her sister, her grey eyes wide and appealing. "Oh, how am I to find him?" she cried, helplessly.

Marion did not answer at once. She looked thoughtfully into the sweet, eager face before her, and enclosed it between her palms. "Do you really want to find him?" she asked at last. "Would you take him back if you did?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried Marjorie. "I would do anything, I would devote my life to him, to make up for the wrong I have done."

"But the little snake will always be there: I saw it a moment ago."

"I won't mind," said Marjorie, bravely. "I will endure anything for his sake; I will hide it, crush it, kill it."

Marion looked at her with tender solicitude. "Poor little bird!" she said, softly. "With your nature, how did you come to love such a man?"

Marjorie fired up. "He has everything to make me love him. He is honourable and just and kind and generous and noble. He has a mind far above mine. His only sins are those to which I have driven him. He never did a mean action in his life. He is not a bad man, Marion, and you have no right to hint it."

"I didn't intend to hint it," said Marion, quietly. "I think he is all—or nearly all—you say. But he *has* a kink in his nature, which makes him the very opposite of our demure little Marjorie."

Marjorie made no response. She gazed pensively into the glowing fire. "What am I to do, Marion?" she said, presently. "In all the world what chance is there of finding him?"

"The world is not so large as it seems," replied Marion. "He must have left an address of some

kind with someone. He can't have cut himself off completely from every living creature he was ever connected with. James will know what to do, he always does."

Marjorie started slightly at the name. This was a new recipient of her secret, the necessity of whose participation in it had temporarily been forgotten.

"Yes, of course James must know," she said, after a pause, answering her own thoughts. "But, Marion, need you tell him all? Need you tell him why Norman went away?"

"It will be difficult for him to help you unless I do," replied Marion, after a moment's reflection. "You see, when he has found Norman, he will have to go and see him and talk to him and try to persuade him to return; and how is he to do that unless he understands the reasons which made him leave you?"

Marjorie recognised the force of this argument. It was obvious that, if she was to be re-united to her husband, someone must undertake the post of intermediary, and her brother-in-law seemed to be the person naturally qualified to do so. Therefore, though she shrank from the necessity, she put no restrictions on her sister's discretion.

She remained with Marion to tea, and then returned home. No entreaties could induce her to stay longer. Her children would need her, and they must now be her first care. Though she yearned for the continued support of her sister's steady, tranquil nature, her mother-love drew her even more strongly to the lonely mites who awaited her. So Marion saw her into a hansom.

"Try not to worry, dear," were her parting words. "James *shall* find him."

CHAPTER IV

THE fly in which we left Norman Villiers and his books—a covered barouche of somewhat antiquated pattern—was called upon to make a considerable journey. It rolled on steadily throughout the night over miry roads. Just as dawn was breaking the outskirts of London were reached. Some distance, however, still remained to be travelled. The driver turned northward and drove through silent by-streets and awakening thoroughfares to Marylebone. Here, after receiving sundry directions from his fare, which he augmented by inquiries of bystanders on his own account, he drew up before the door of a small bookseller. A youth who was taking down the shutters interrupted the whistled strains of a popular melody to look at the early arrival with mild surprise. He touched his cap to Villiers as the latter alighted, answered a question as to his master's accessibility, and then returned to his work and his whistling. Norman

entered the shop and exchanged a few words with the proprietor, who left his breakfast for the purpose, with the result that the books were removed from the cab and stored in the bookseller's back premises. This done, Villiers emerged again upon the street and paid off his driver. Standing on the pavement with his bag in his hand, he watched the vehicle creak slowly away and rumble into the distance, until finally it disappeared round a bend. Then he turned and walked briskly in the opposite direction.

In a few minutes he hailed a hansom and drove to the First Avenue Hotel. He engaged a room there and ordered some breakfast. After the meal he went upstairs, removed his outer clothes, and lay down upon his bed. He was considerably exhausted by the tedious night journey, and quickly fell asleep. About one o'clock he got up and dressed, using a little more care than was his custom. Then he lunched and went out of the hotel.

He had chosen his quarters with a view of avoiding chance acquaintance, and he was therefore somewhat annoyed to be recognised, just after he had left the building, by a short, muscular man, with close-cropped black hair and a slightly Jewish

cast of countenance, who was hurrying along Holborn. There was a cheerful light in his eye, a beam of human kindness, which assured you at once of a man to be trusted. This was Mr. Thornton, the junior member of the publishing house of Clarke, Thornton & Co. He accounted it among his professional achievements that he had "discovered" Villiers. The latter, on this occasion, met his genial advance with slight reserve.

"What, Villiers!" said the publisher, briskly. "One doesn't often meet you in this part of the world. Have you lost your way, old fellow?"

"Not if this is anywhere in the neighbourhood of Bedford Row," replied Norman, quietly. "I am on my way to see my solicitors."

"Come along, then." The two men turned and walked west together. "What's the trouble? You are not quite up to the mark to-day, Villiers."

"A little pensive," answered Villiers, "nothing more."

"Nothing wrong, I hope? All well at home?"

"Perfectly," said Villiers, "when I left them."

"I'll tell you what you want," said Thornton, with conviction; "you're down on your luck. I'm going to Newmarket the day after to-morrow to

see the Cambridgeshire. You must pack up and come with me. No trouble; just a couple of nights; plenty of fun; and home again as fit as a fiddle."

Villiers smiled slightly. "You've an excellent heart, Thornton," he said, "but your logic is deplorable. Because you happen to find watching horse-racing an exhilarating form of amusement, you assume that it would necessarily have a similar effect upon me."

"And so it would."

"On the contrary, I think it would depress me."

"Not it. Come and try; I'll answer for the good results."

"No," said Villiers, still smiling. "I appreciate your kindness, my dear Thornton, but I am not in the least likely to visit a race-meeting. From what I can gather, you wait half an hour for half a minute of disappointment, and then repeat the process."

"Well, if you won't come," said Thornton, good-humouredly, "I'll do the next best thing for you. I'm stretching a point, because I can see you want something to give you a fillip. I have this information from a quarter I would trust with a hundred-pound note."

The two had stopped at the corner of Bedford Row. Thornton laid his forefinger on the sleeve of Villiers' coat. "'Masterman Ready' is the horse, my dear boy. It is going to win."

"'Masterman Ready,'" said Villiers, repeating the name mechanically.

"'Masterman Ready,'" said Thornton, firmly.

"Well, and if it actually should win, what then? Tell me precisely what you expect me to do with this piece of information?"

"Do with it?" The publisher was aghast. "Go to your man, get the longest price he'll give you, and put on every halfpenny you have to spare—not all your fortune, because the horse might break his neck."

"My man," remarked Norman, "would take a little finding, I fancy."

"You can safely back it, Villiers," proceeded the other, without noticing the commentary. "To tell the truth, I've a few more pounds on it myself than I should care to lose."

"Well, I won't add to your responsibility by entrusting it with anything of mine," said Villiers. "I once betted half-a-crown and lost, and I have never given myself a chance to lose another."

Thornton laughed heartily. "Then I'm afraid you'll have to take to drink, old fellow. But if ever you should get it into your head to write a sporting novel, don't send it to us."

"That reminds me," said Villiers. "I was intending to come and see you this afternoon. My whereabouts will be a little uncertain for the next few weeks, so if you should find it necessary to communicate with me, direct me to the care of my solicitors, will you?" He wrote some words on a slip of paper and passed it to Thornton. "That is the address."

The publisher looked at the slip and put it in his pocket. "A little trip, is it?" he said. "Local colour? Oh, you novelists!"

"A very respectable body, I believe," said Villiers, lightly.

"They've two ideas, my dear boy—royalties and advertisements. And that brings us to business. We must have something out before long, or we shall lose our public. How goes the new novel?"

"Slowly," said Villiers, "but, I hope, satisfactorily. I can let you have the first half of the MS. at any time."

"No use. We can do nothing with it now until

the spring. Keep it going and send us the whole bundle together." He moved away a few steps. "And remember," he added, "it must run to a hundred thousand. They are beginning to tire of pica and margins."

Villiers started to cross the street. "They're continually tiring of something," he said, laughing. "They'll tire of novels directly."

"Not they," said Thornton. "Good-bye, old fellow. Keep up your spirits. And take my advice: just have a sovereign on 'Masterman Ready.'" He whipped round with a cheery nod and walked briskly away towards Oxford Street.

His sunny spirits had to some extent infected Villiers. The latter continued to smile as he made his way up Bedford Row. His face re-assumed its wonted thoughtful expression, however, as he approached the offices of Messrs Markham, Flood & Spindle, his solicitors. He entered the clerks' office and asked for Mr Spindle. Mr Spindle was in, but he was engaged. Would Mr Villiers call again or take a seat? Mr Villiers would take a seat, and did so accordingly. After waiting twenty minutes he was ushered into the presence of the lawyer.

Mr Spindle was the junior member of his firm, but the one upon whose shoulders rested the main conduct of its business. He was a tall, keen man of forty, with a heavy brown moustache and slightly protruding eyes of the same colour—eyes which pierced you sufficiently without the addition of the glass which he occasionally screwed into one of them to focus his object more effectually. He was standing on the centre of his hearthrug to receive Norman.

"Good-day, Mr Villiers," he said, the instant the latter appeared in the doorway. "What can I do for you? More trouble with the American copyrights?"

Villiers was not a client whose business was apt to be particularly remunerative, and Mr Spindle accordingly thought that the present conversation might be satisfactorily concluded without changing from the perpendicular. Norman had no such view, however. He knew that the interview would be charged for, and he intended to obtain a reasonable equivalent. He placed his hat on one chair and seated himself in another. "No," he answered, deliberately, "none that I am aware of, Mr Spindle.

My present errand is unconnected with my literary work."

The solicitor, after some shuffling, was obliged to follow his client's example. He took an upright seat near his desk and looked uncomfortable. A chair with him was an article of the merest temporary convenience. Doubtless he occasionally rested; but for one unacquainted with his domestic life it was difficult to conceive him in repose.

"Ha!" he asserted, "then you want me to draw your will?" He took a sheet of paper from a pigeon-hole and pulled it towards him.

"Not even that," replied Villiers, quietly.

"At any rate," said Mr Spindle, with a contraction of the features that was intended to be a smile, "you don't wish me to guess conundrums."

The remark was saved from asperity merely by the fact that Villiers was a client. The latter was quite unruffled.

"I shall occupy your time only a very few moments, Mr Spindle," he said. "I wish to consult you in reference to my position matrimonially, or, rather, to inform you of it, in view of eventualities. I have left my wife."

Mr Spindle cocked the glass in his eye. A keen

interest suddenly lighted his face. He scented a lucrative action at law. "I am sorry, Mr Villiers," he said.

He did not look sorry; neither did Villiers feel the need of his sympathy. "My action is purely voluntary," he remarked.

"Precisely. I intended to express regret that your marriage had not proved to be a satisfactory one."

"My wife is above me, infinitely," explained Norman. "I cannot attain her level."

The solicitor's intent glare gave way momentarily to an unsympathetic smile. "You are not the first man to make that discovery, Mr Villiers," he said. "Is the estrangement likely to be permanent?"

"It must be."

"Do you anticipate divorce proceedings?"

"I think it possible."

Mr Spindle was beginning to treat Norman with consideration. "In that case you desire us to undertake the conduct of the defence."

"There will be no defence."

Mr Spindle dropped his eye-glass. His opinion of Villiers, as a man, stood precisely where it had

stood before. As a client his value had sunk almost cent. per cent. He quickly closed the interview.

"Then, if a petition is filed, you wish us merely to watch the proceedings on your behalf and to keep you informed?"

"If you will do so."

"That shall be done." Mr Spindle rose.

Norman also rose and took his hat. "In the meantime," he said, "until my plans are more settled, you will perhaps be good enough to forward any letters that may arrive?"

"Certainly. Will you give me an address?"

Villiers handed him an envelope. "I need not say that this is in professional confidence?"

"Of course. Can I be of use to you in any other way?"

"None, I think," said Villiers.

Mr Spindle opened the door. "Cheerless weather; but what can we expect?" said he. "Good-day, Mr Villiers, good-day.—Mister—er—Johnson!" And Norman, as he descended the stairs, heard an unfortunate clerk, fearful of a moment's delay, hurrying down with the great man's letters for signature.

After leaving his solicitors' office Villiers visited

a hairdresser's, and then took a tour of the shops in a hansom, making several small purchases, all articles of attire, which he conveyed back with him to the hotel. About seven o'clock he went up to his room to dress. In half an hour he re-appeared, wearing a long fawn overcoat over his evening clothes, and called for a cab. He was now completely transformed from the slovenly Villiers whose acquaintance we originally made. Well groomed, well dressed, from his glossy silk hat to his polished boots, as he stood for a moment on the steps of the hotel waiting for his cab, one might have searched London in vain for a more acceptable sample of a representative Englishman.

The hansom drew to the curb, and Villiers entered it. "Albany Mansions, Sloane Street," he said to the driver.

The latter nodded and threaded his way across the street. Then he flicked his horse and drove quickly out of sight amid the maze of traffic.

CHAPTER V

"ALBANY MANSIONS" was a considerable red-brick building in the neighbourhood of Sloane Street, divided into suites of apartments something in the system of flats. Each suite, however, comprised only two rooms and a lobby, and the whole group was worked by a staff of servants under the management of a caretaker and his wife, who occupied the basement. The former was a superannuated soldier, sunburnt and erect, who bore on his broad chest, with pardonable pride, several tokens of his services to his country. He was standing at the main entrance of the building when Villiers arrived in his cab. Raising his hand to the salute as the latter alighted, he stepped across the pavement to meet him.

"Well, Stevens," said the novelist, "here I am; well up to time, you see."

"We're all ready for you, sir," said Stevens. "We've lit a bit of fire in the sitting-room."

"That's right. Has the remainder of the furniture arrived?"

"Yes, sir; the last lot came in yesterday. I had it put where you said, sir."

"Well done! I've left my things at the hotel, so I shall not sleep here to-night. To-morrow I hope to get finally installed."

"Very good, sir."

"I hope Mrs Stevens will not find me a troublesome tenant. I think my habits are tolerably regular."

"Oh, God bless you, sir!" said Stevens, "we're used to anything. We have them here that keeps all hours, day *and* night."

"I expect you have," said Villiers, laughing. He was passing on his way to the steps when Stevens stopped him.

"Let me see, sir, have you the key?"

"No," said Villiers, turning with a slightly conscious laugh, "neither I have."

The commissionnaire brought out a bunch. "No. 11," said he, removing one of them. "That's it, sir."

"Thank you, Stevens, thank you." Villiers took the key and returned to the stairs. He whistled a

few bars of an air as he went up. It was not a habit of his; he was merely anxious to convince himself that the slight piece of forgetfulness had left him undisturbed.

No. 11 was on the second floor, and here Norman came to a halt. He made no attempt to enter it, however. He put away the key which the caretaker had given him and took another from his pocket. This he inserted in the lock of No. 12, turned it, and went in. He crossed the lobby and passed through the inner door beyond. A soft light fell upon him from a fire and shaded candles. He had entered a room furnished with considerable taste and elegance, clearly no bachelor's apartment. A round table in the centre was spread with a dainty supper for two, glass and silver gleaming amid flowers and appetising confections on a snowy cloth.

In a low chair before the fire was seated the owner of the room, a woman in evening dress. She was not only beautiful in an artistic sense, but attractive in the highest degree in a human one. The firelight touched her cheek with a soft blush and struck on a few shining strands in the abundant mass of dark hair which covered her head. She

was gazing pensively into the blaze with eyes dark and deeply glowing, screened by long lashes, like shaded pools. Her gown was of soft black lace, which threw her pearly skin into striking contrast and displayed her symmetrical contours at their highest advantage.

This was Miss Rosamond Hope, a lady who turned the vanities of her sisters to account, and had attained a position of some mark in the journalistic world by contributing articles on dress to various periodicals under various pseudonyms. She shared with a spectacled lady artist on the top storey the distinction of being the only members of the gentler sex to occupy rooms in this building.

She did not rise when Villiers entered, nor even alter her position. "The wanderer has returned, I presume?" she said, still looking into the fire.

Norman crossed the room to the place where she was sitting; and then suddenly she looked up, and a wonderful light gleamed from her eyes into his. Villiers stretched out both his hands; she placed her own in them, and he drew her up to him.

"This time to stay, Rosamond," he said. He took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips, kissed and kissed again, closely, passionately, kissed

the breath from her lungs, almost the life from her heart.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, as she extricated herself, panting, from the embrace, "what a mighty man you are—sometimes!"

"Sometimes?" said Norman, smiling. "Always."

"Boaster!" She flicked his cheek lightly with her finger. "You know what happens to boasters?"

Villiers laughed. Then he glanced at the supper table. "But how am I to return all this munificent hospitality?" he said.

"Very easily," said Rosamond; "by promising to appreciate it. It is not munificent; and, besides, I don't need any return." Then she added: "You know that, don't you, dear?"

"I know there is no one to compare with you in the world," said Villiers, irrelevantly.

"Then, as you are the greatest stranger, you must take this incomparable person in to supper. Shall we leave the drawing-room and go into the *salle-à-manger?*"

"Mind the steps, Miss Hope," said Norman, offering Rosamond his arm.

They seated themselves at the table, side by side.

"Oh, this won't do!" exclaimed Rosamond. "I never heard of the greatest stranger holding the hostess's hand."

"It is an admirable innovation, all the same," said Norman.

"But how am I to eat?"

"Use the other one."

"Eat with the left hand!" protested Rosamond, "when you have no further use for the one in your possession but to squeeze it most unmercifully."

"Sweet fingers!" said Villiers, kissing them as they lay in his palm. "Have I maltreated them very badly?"

"Terribly," said Rosamond, holding up the five pink victims for his inspection. "And since you evidently need something to occupy you, I think I'll make you the butler. Butler, open the champagne."

Norman removed the wire from the cork. Then he took the bottle in his hand and went behind Rosamond's chair. "Champagne, madam?"

"No well-trained butler," said she, "ever *asks* a lady if she will have champagne; and certainly," she added, "he never kisses the back of her neck."

"In this case," said Norman, repeating the of-

fence, "any butler would be exonerated, on account of the exceptional temptation."

Rosamond burst out laughing. "I should like to see how you would look if your own brother—much less servant—made that excuse. Consider yourself dismissed."

Villiers filled her glass and his own, and then sat down. He held up the golden wine and looked across it into her glowing, smiling face. "To your eyes, Rosamond, to your lips!"

He drank the contents of the glass and put it down. There was a moment's pause. "Your turn, sweetheart," said Norman. "'*La reine boit*'! What is your toast?"

Slowly she raised her glass. "To—to—" He was looking into her eyes, and she into his. Their faces drew closer as they gazed, and closer still; mechanically the glass returned to the table; at last the two pairs of lips met, and clung together, and seemed that they never would separate.

With long breaths they fell apart. "And some fools think they have kissed!" said Norman.

There was some food on his plate, which he had not tasted. "Why don't you eat?" said his hostess.

"No appetite," he said, laughing. He left his

seat and went to a Chesterfield couch which stood near the wall. "Come here, Rosamond!"

She obeyed him with an assumption of petulance. "Imperator, why should you exercise your despotic sway to interfere with my supper?"

"Because you need supper no more than I do," said Villiers; "because, if you tried to force another morsel down that dainty throat, it would choke you."

She laughed lightly. "Since when has this startling incapacity to eat afflicted me?"

"Since a moment ago."

She laughed again. "Prove it," she cried; "prove it. I defy you."

For answer he folded her closely in his arms, and kissed her with burning lips on hair and eyes and mouth, on neck and shoulders, on every little space which her evening bodice left open to his ravages.

Suddenly, withdrawing partly from his embrace, she dropped her head on the back of the couch. "Oh!" she sighed.

He took her gently into his clasp again and looked into her face. "Well, little tyrant, is it proved? is it?"

Her eyes were lowered, and she nervously pressed the arm that encircled her.

"Sweet Rosamond!" said Norman. He raised her tenderly, and, holding his arm about her, supported her within it from the room.

CHAPTER VI

NEARLY an hour had elapsed when they returned. Rosamond was pinning a small brooch in her bodice.

"Why, how clumsy you are!" she exclaimed, turning to Norman with a bright glance. "Let me valet you." Standing in front of him, she loosened with her slim fingers the ends of his cravat and then neatly re-tied it, finishing with a light tap on his cheek. "You should be ashamed to show such incompetence."

They seated themselves at the table and resumed their supper. Rosamond was in excellent spirits, and upon her devolved the major share of the conversation.

"Why so glum?" she said, blithely, to her companion at length; "prithee, why so quiet?"

"Am I quiet?" said Norman. "If so, it is inexcusably rude of me with such a hostess and such a supper."

"Then the indictment is proved, I'm afraid," she answered, smiling. "I know what it is," she added, after a pause, looking into his face, "you are thinking of your wife?"

Villiers had a momentary impulse to turn away the charge with a flippant rejoinder, but he changed his mind. "Yes," he admitted, frankly, "I was."

Rosamond sighed slightly. "It is always the same."

"Why do you sigh, dear?"

"You love her still, Norman?"

"I love her," said Villiers, "as an artist would love a perfectly executed statue, as every man with unblunted perceptions must love a noble-minded woman whose goodness he knows through and through."

"And yet you were not happy with her?"

"She was not intended to make a man happy—not, at least, such a man as I am. My marriage with her was a long, constantly present, gnawing disappointment."

"Am I a disappointment, Norman?" said Rosamond, softly. "Do I make you happy?"

It was flagrant fishing, but Villiers rose to the bait. His eyes glowed with sudden fire, his whole

being expanded. "Happy!" he reiterated, "happy! Rosamond, you can have no conception what your love means to me. For another hour, for one more such hour as I have passed with you, I would go through fire and pestilence, I would go through hell itself."

"Hush! Hush!" His vehemence almost startled her. "Don't look at me like that, dear," she said; "you frighten me. I know what you mean, and I feel for you truly, deeply. Poor Norman," she added, taking his hand and stroking it softly, "you have lived in purgatory."

"Will you always be the same, I wonder?" said Norman. "Won't a time come, before long, when you will tire of me?"

She raised his hand and pressed it to her cheek. "No," she answered, softly, "you need not fear that."

"Never, dear?"

"Never." She kissed his hand and let it go. "Besides," she added, "we shall have no chance to tire of one another if we live apart as we have agreed to."

"That is a subject I intended to speak to you about, Rosamond," said Villiers. "This arrange-

ment is admirable in many ways, but it has struck me that a time might come when it would be better that you should appear to be married."

"That time hasn't come yet," said she, "and I don't think it will. We won't meet trouble half-way."

"But why are you so anxious that we should live separate lives? I should like to be with you constantly."

Rosamond smiled a little intolerantly. "Of course," she said, "you are improvident, like all your sex. There are many things we should like to do constantly, but we don't do them, because we know they would pall if we did. Let me ask you a question."

"As many as you like."

"When you came into this room to-night and saw me sitting here, did your heart beat faster?"

"Of course."

"Did it beat faster even when you were coming up the stairs?"

"Yes."

"Would it do that, do you think, if you had lived in the same house with me and grown used

to my continual presence at your side, say for six months?"

"I cannot conceive," said Norman, "that it would ever do anything else."

"You men are intolerably stupid in understanding human nature," said Rosamond; "you can never see beyond the present. Let me tell you, sir, that it certainly would not. You might be pleased to see me—quietly, unemotionally pleased—but no more."

"Don't hint it, Rosamond."

"But you know what I mean?"

"Oh, yes."

"That is not enough, is it?"

"No," said Norman, "that is not enough."

"And so we must live apart and see each other merely sometimes. The sum total of happiness, if people only understood it, is having something good to look forward to. Without that, even though things are going well with us, life is colourless and vapid. Why, if we lived together," she added, with a slight laugh, "we might as well be married."

Norman looked at her curiously. "Does that explain why you have not married?" he asked.

"Partly. The prize, if you win it, is a very small

one, and the stake is enormous—a homely, negative kind of happiness is the best it has to offer. But even if it were otherwise, I have never met anyone to whom I would resign my freedom absolutely, irrevocably for life."

"Not to me, Rosamond?"

"No," she answered. "I love you, Norman, I think you are necessary to my happiness, but even if you were free I would not marry you."

Norman took her hand. "Don't say that, sweetheart," he pleaded. "It is just possible, if my wife —if I were divorced—"

"Oh, you bold man," cried Rosamond, "would you try the experiment again? What would happen if we were to marry? In less than a year we should peer at one another through a fern from each end of a long table and talk about the weather and our neighbours."

"I could talk about Nebuchadnezzar with you," said Norman, "and not be bored."

"You would refuse to dress for dinner," she continued, "and I should read a novel in the drawing-room afterwards till I fell asleep."

"Sleeping beauty," said Norman; "I would wake you with a kiss."

"But what if I were snoring?" said Rosamond.

Norman shuddered. "Don't speak of it," he said; "you couldn't."

She laughed brightly. "No woman can until she is married. Can you think of anything worse?"

"No," admitted Norman.

She laughed again. "I am only showing you the pleasures of a home life," she said. "Granting I didn't do that, I should wake in a bad temper and tell you I had been working all day and wanted to rest. I have been working to-day," she added, inconsequently.

"But you don't want to sleep."

"We are not married," said she. "Oh, no," she concluded, "I will keep my latch-key and go and come as I choose, and Norman Villiers shall be an occasional privileged visitor, as long as he considers it worth his while to make himself agreeable."

"Which will be always," said Norman. He left his seat and bent over to kiss her.

"It will be longer, at any rate," said she, putting up her lips to meet his, "than if the law had bound us hand and foot."

Villiers remained an hour or two later, and then

went back to his hotel. He returned on the following morning, bringing with him his personal belongings. This time he entered his own suite. It was precisely similar in shape and design with that occupied by Rosamond, and was furnished with a considerable degree of bachelor comfort. Two easy chairs and a couch, a solid oak table, a pair of long bookcases and a thick carpet formed the principal contents of the sitting-room, in addition to his writing-table. Norman spent the morning arranging the furniture to his liking and hanging the pictures. In the afternoon he paid a visit to the Marylebone bookseller, and returned with his library and with numerous additional books which he had been obliged to purchase. He dined alone that night. Afterwards he brought from his bag a substantial bundle of manuscript and some clean sheets of sermon-paper, which he placed upon the writing-table. He sat down before it and took up a pen. After reading more than once the last two or three pages he had written, he lost touch of the subject and gazed with a pensive, somewhat abstracted expression about the room, at the bright, new furniture, at the pictures he had just hung, at

the fire flickering in the hearth. He sighed, and again read the last of his previous work. Then he got up and poked the fire and lighted a pipe. Finally he dipped his pen in the ink and began to write.

CHAPTER VII

It was ten minutes to seven, on the evening of Marjorie's conversation with her sister, when Mr James Baker walked up to the door of his Hampstead residence and let himself in with his latch-key. He was of the genial, open, optimistic order of beings—florid and clean-shaven, save for a thin growth of light side-whisker—though by no means to be accredited with the comfortable dulness of wit frequently associated with those adjectives. An occasional, but decided, compression of his well-moulded lips and the kindly gleam in his good-humoured eyes effectually dispersed any such impression. He had not yet reached, but was fast approaching, that period of his existence when he would have to admit his figure to be beyond redemption. At present it still afforded him some concern: he still paid periodical visits to Continental baths, in the recurring hope that they would enable him to resume that lightness and elasticity

of form which he had enjoyed at a date not yet sufficiently remote to reconcile him entirely to its loss. A capable man of business in the City, a keen sportsman on his native Yorkshire heath, always cheerful, always courteous, J. J. Baker was popular wherever he chose to go.

He placed his hat on the rack, and had succeeded in pinioning his arms in the sleeves of his overcoat, in his efforts to remove it, when his wife ran down the stairs to his assistance.

"I didn't hear you come in, dear," she said; "you are early to-night."

She released his left arm, receiving in return an affectionate kiss on the right cheek, over her husband's shoulder.

"Now the other one," said James; whether the sleeve or the cheek he did not specify. At any rate, she extricated his right arm also, and was rewarded by the complementary salute on the left cheek.

Marion followed her husband to his dressing-room. She herself had already dressed—had purposely done so, in order to be able to talk to him in the half-hour's interval before the dinner-gong placed them at the mercy of the receptive ears of

the servants. It was an occasional practice of hers with which James was well acquainted. Accordingly, as he poured out his hot water, he prepared himself to give an attentive ear to the story of some hitch in the domestic machinery.

"If she wants to give the cook notice," he said to himself, "I shall stick up for her; her *vol-au-vent Toulouse* is not to be lightly discarded."

Pursuing this line of thought, he was already evolving a small mollifying speech, which, while freely accepting all her premises, fully sharing her consequent very natural annoyance, should yet venture to diverge ever so slightly from her conclusions, when her voice interrupted his meditations.

"Marjorie has been here to-day," she said.

"Really," said James, from the soap-suds; "and how is our little Marjorie?"

"Our little Marjorie," replied his wife, "is in very serious trouble, James."

James assimilated this information while he scrubbed his face with a big towel, imparting an even warmer glow to his beneficent countenance. By such-like manœuvres he was firmly under the impression that he had succeeded, through life, in concealing the natural tenderness of his heart from the

observation of his fellow-creatures, and particularly from that of his wife.

He threw the towel over the rack. "The children?" he asked.

"No."

"Not Norman?"

"Yes."

Again James made no immediate comment. This time the collar of his shirt showed exasperating recalcitrance. "We had better send Percival out," he said, presently. "I've no faith in local men."

Marion smiled—an affectionate, sympathetic smile—partly at the quaint inutility of the suggestion in existing circumstances, partly at her husband's strenuous efforts to force himself into a temper. "It is not illness, dear," she said, quietly. "It may be less unfortunate than that, it may be much more; I can't say at present. Norman has gone away."

James, as has been said, was no fool. The last words—simple enough in themselves—at once carried their full weight to his mind; but he was so utterly unprepared for them that at first he could only repeat, "Gone away?"

Marion made no comment; and presently he added: "It's so astonishingly sudden! They appeared to me to get on uncommonly well together. Is it a mutual arrangement?"

"Marjorie had no wish for it."

"Then he has deserted her?"

"Yes, I suppose it amounts to that," said Marion; "but the word sounds harsh. He has provided for her—quite as well as he was in a position to do."

The concluding sentence—which a superficial mind might have heralded as bearing an element of alleviation—had precisely the opposite effect upon James. It broke upon him with almost a greater shock than the original announcement. For it carried a suggestion of forethought and preparation, of completeness and irrevocableness in the whole thing, which was vastly disquieting; and excluded, definitely and decidedly, the encouraging theory of a sudden freak, to be subsequently regretted and forgiven, upon which his mind had been hopefully fixing.

"Hum!" he said, at length. "It's a deucedly serious situation, Marion; there's very little doubt about that. I'm afraid it looks as if our little friend

was in for something more than her fair share of tribulation for some time to come. Poor little Marjorie! Poor little innocent Marjorie!" He gave a savage pull at the cravat he was attempting to tie. "Confound the man!—the tie!" he corrected, hastily, throwing the offending garment on the floor. "I beg your pardon, Marion."

"You needn't," said Marion, smiling, "you said nothing."

"I intended to," said James. He dragged out a drawer and rummaged in the interior. "I believe these ties are specially constructed to undermine the moral sense and drive you eventually into the regions below."

"Let me tie it, dear," said Marion, gently. She took the tie from his hand and placed herself in front of him.

"At present," proceeded her husband, as he submitted comfortably to the ministrations of her fair hands, "I hardly know enough to decide what is best to be done. Norman isn't the man to be brow-beaten. We must get something tangible to work on. Do you know anything of the woman?" he asked, abruptly. "Of course there is a woman concerned?"

"I think there is," replied Marion. ("There!" she interjected parenthetically, surveying her handiwork. "A trained valet couldn't have done it better, I'm sure.") "Yes, I think there is certainly a woman, James; but Marjorie knows nothing of her existence. Everything has been a blinding shock to the poor child."

James proceeded leisurely to fill his pockets with various small articles from the dressing-table. "I feel uncommonly like groping in the dark," said he. "You are not keeping anything back, my dear? When was it that he cut off in this extraordinary way?"

"Last night."

"Without explanation? Come, little woman"—James had a habit of calling his wife "little woman," though, to be sure, the epithet was not singularly appropriate, seeing that she was almost as tall as himself—"you must treat me candidly if I'm to be of any use. Was there a scene? Did he have no conversation with her before he went away? How does she know about this monetary provision? How does she know he doesn't intend to return?"

Marion hesitated. "He left a letter," said she.

"Oh!" The deep vowel came from James's healthy lungs with satisfying fulness.

"The difficulty between them," Marion continued, after an appreciable pause, "is a delicate one and quite personal. Marjorie was very anxious to avoid its being known—even to you. But I really don't see how you can help her if you are kept in the dark. What do you think yourself?"

James was quite free from any idle curiosity. He took a moment or two to consider the question, and then replied: "That depends a good deal upon what she wishes me to do."

"Well, in the first place," said Marion, "she hasn't an idea at present where he is. I told her I knew you would manage to find out somehow, and then that you would go and see him."

"I foresee a pleasant interview," said James, drily.

"It won't be anything else if you are there," said Marion, promptly. "You always make everything pleasant."

James flushed slightly with pleasure. Then he took her soft, white hands, and looked at them as they lay, sparkling with diamonds, in his palms. He pressed them to his lips. "If the world was

composed of fond little indulgent wives," said he, "that would be an easy thing to do. . . . He might be in America."

"Never mind; you would go."

"But what would become of the business?"

"You would manage," said Marion, without hesitation.

She was not "managing" her husband, as the phrase is. Every word she uttered was the simple expression of her thoughts, founded on her perfect confidence, not only in his capability, but in his goodness of heart. Capable and self-reliant herself, if occasion needed, she had plumbed the depth of her husband's nature, and was content to repose in what she found there.

James laughed. "Well, we'll go into that when the time comes," he said. "But, at any rate, I can't pretend to be able to argue with a man without a nodding acquaintance with the point of difference between us, so I am afraid the secret will have to come out. Examine the keyhole, my dear, and then tell me the little difficulty." He took up a brush and comb, and, turning to the glass, addressed himself to the never satisfactory task of making a little go a long way.

It took him some minutes to complete the process, and by the time he had finished his wife had not spoken. He turned round. Marion was decidedly blushing.

"Good gracious!" said James. An amused smile gradually invaded his face.

"Don't laugh at me, James," said Marion, half apologetically. "It's really very difficult. Oh, you dear old stupid!" she added, "can't you guess?"

"Looking at your very pretty embarrassment, my dear," said James, "I could possibly make a tolerable shot at the general nature of the difficulty. But why, in the name of fortune, this violent estrangement?" A merry twinkle shot into his good-humoured eyes. "Rather the reverse of the ordinary way of things," he added, wickedly.

Marion blushed again; but this time she came up to him and laid her two hands on his shoulders. "James, dear," she said, "supposing I were very, *very* virtuous?"

"You couldn't be more virtuous than you are, little woman," said James, quietly.

"Well then, supposing I—supposing I were less human than—than I am?" she finished, and suddenly cast down her eyes.

James raised her head and kissed her. "I understand," he said. Then, suddenly, almost with a laugh, "Perfectly preposterous!" he exclaimed.

"Don't judge him hastily," said Marion. "Let us be quite fair. Wait till you have heard everything."

Then she told him. If she had formed an opinion herself, it was not apparent in her narrative. She related the facts quite simply and impartially, without omission and without exaggeration. That may seem to us, theoretically, a sufficiently easy thing to do. But if you feel any doubt of its practical difficulty, reader, take the history of any disagreement within your knowledge, public or private, and endeavour to explain it without betraying on which side your own sympathies lie.

James heard her through without remark. Then he repeated, deliberately, his previous comment: "Perfectly preposterous!" He took a clean handkerchief from a drawer and turned down the light, and then condescended to supplement that observation with another, equally explicit: "A pair of noodles!"

CHAPTER VIII

JAMES followed his wife down to the dining-room. Their *tête-à-tête* dinner was never an occasion of much spontaneity between them. To-night it was peculiarly the reverse. The presence of the maid closed the door to the only topic they could either of them pretend to take an interest in. It is curious to remark that, whereas the members of a party of four or five allow their tongues a laxity, before servants, to the point of glaring indiscretion, as soon as the numbers are reduced to two the presence of an attendant pair of ears acts as a dead bar upon any interchange of ideas beyond the merest commonplace. It was, therefore, not until they were left alone, and James had turned his chair to the fire, a glass of Burgundy at his elbow, a cigar between his lips, his shirt-front bulging in a post-prandial parabolic curve, that they were at liberty to follow their inclinations in the choice of a subject for discussion.

Marion rose from her seat and poured water into the vases of flowers which stood on the table. The process bringing her to her husband's end of the board, she replenished his glass from the decanter, the latter directing the precise limit of the operation with a virtuous forefinger. He laboured under the singular hallucination, in the face of considerable discouragement, that he was in the habit of drinking one half-glass of Burgundy after dinner. His wife, however, had no illusions either as to its generous measure or its steady repetition. Accordingly, the virtuous forefinger passed unheeded.

He raised the broad V-shaped glass to his lips with affectionate deliberation. "A wonderful wine!" he said. (He said it every night.) "If Norman had been built on that, instead of on weak tea and weaker whisky-and-water, we should have had none of these monkey tricks." He passed his hand vaguely over the decanters. "What are you drinking, my dear?"

Marion was drinking nothing, and said so, as she always did. To-night, however, he pressed the point. "You are not looking quite yourself, little woman; this business has worried you." He re-

moved the stopper from the port decanter. "A glass of this '78 is the best medicine in the world for you."

Marion repudiated the necessity with a smile, but she allowed him to fill her glass, and then drew a footstool to the hearth and sat down upon it, breaking the coal into a brighter flame. It must be confessed that James's reflections on her appearance seemed to have singularly little to justify them. As she sat by the fire in her dinner-gown of pale yellow, relieved here and there by ribbons of a deeper shade, her dark hair coiled abundantly on her head, her shapely neck and shoulders, flooded in the warm light, rising with almost stately grace from the laces at her bosom, a soft underglow of colour in her smooth cheeks, she conveyed the impression of one whose desirable exterior was the product, not only of excellent health at the moment, but of the absence of any serious lapse from it during the thirty-odd years of her existence.

"I shouldn't have taken Norman to be that sort of a man," proceeded James, reflectively. "Some of my very best stories have often fallen flat in his neighbourhood."

"Perhaps it was too serious a matter with him to joke about," said Marion, quietly.

James looked at her with mild surprise. "Why, my dear," he said, "I'm inclined to think that you lean to the side of this home-wrecker."

"No," said Marion, "not quite that. But I think Marjorie is a little goose to ruin her happiness in this way. She is so desperately fond of him all the time—that makes it almost exasperating. She is breaking her heart for him; I believe she loves him just as much as it is possible for a woman to love a man."

"Supposing," said James, slowly,—"I don't say there is a great chance of it, I don't think there is—but supposing we could induce him to come back to her, would she be different?"

"I don't know," said Marion; "I doubt it. I know she would try."

"It occurs to me," said James, "if you will forgive the blasphemy, my dear, that when the Creator made Marjorie, he overlooked the fact that she would have to pass through this world on her way to the next."

He carefully broke the ash from his cigar, then added, drily: "It is almost as unfortunate as to be

furnished, like many of us, with paraphernalia of too exclusively mundane utility."

Marion shook her head in smiling denial of the remark's personal application. Then suddenly she looked up. "Can you find him, James?"

"In the course of time," said James, "I think so, decidedly. Unless he intends to relinquish his career, he must keep in touch somewhere. I will make some inquiries to-morrow. If I can't trace him myself, I must employ someone who can."

"That is really a detail," he proceeded, presently. "The important point to consider is, what is to be done afterwards. To begin with, I take it for granted that Marjorie isn't thinking of divorce?"

"Oh, no."

"She would take him back again?"

"Yes."

"In any case? Whatever has happened?"

"Whatever has happened," said Marion.

"Very well, then we'll take a cheerful view," said James, blithely. "If we can get them to make up the quarrel, this little breeze may help them to understand one another in the future, which they evidently haven't succeeded in doing hitherto. Con-

stitutional difference is all moonshine, in my opinion."

Marion looked at him gravely and shook her head. "It is real, James," she said.

James indulged in a good-humoured unbelieving laugh, and helped himself to his third half-glass of Burgundy. "Have it as you will," he said. "We must do the best we can, in any case, to get this runaway back to the nest. If we fail—"

"Yes?" said Marion.

"If we fail," he said off-handedly, almost defiantly, "we shall have to make the future as bright as we can for Marjorie. We can't let her mope out the rest of her life in solitude,"—the last as if refuting a contrary assertion.

"No, dear," said Marion, quietly. How well she knew this husband of hers!

"You admit that yourself—the thing's obvious. Then I really see no reason—for the life of me I can see no reason"—his temper was decidedly rising—"why, in that case, she shouldn't come here with the children—permanently—to live! There's room enough, in all conscience!" He savagely flicked the ash from his cigar, and stuck it back into the corner of his mouth.

There was a pause, during which Marion avoided the wrathful gaze of her lord and master —which, by-the-by, was directed to the chimney-piece. Then, slowly, she crept from her place and slid between his knees, wound her soft arms round his substantial waist, and rested her cheek upon the aforesaid parabolic curve of his shirt-front, pressing it back into place. And if James could have looked into her face, he would have known that her eyes were glistening and that just then it would have been difficult for her to speak.

But he was not very conveniently situated to look into her face; and so it happened that, after his surprise had evaporated, he burst into a sudden hearty roar of laughter. "Of all the incomprehensible, illogical little women!" he exclaimed. "If ever I forget myself and let you have a glimpse of my infernal temper, you treat me as if I had been paying you pretty compliments by the hour. It's not a very sound policy, my dear, because it tempts me to become the deuce of an irascible bear." His hand wandered caressingly over as much of his wife as he could reach; and presently she returned to her seat by the fire.

There was a considerable interval of silence. Then James said suddenly: "Where is she now?"

"Marjorie? She has gone home."

"Home?" The word sounded strange.

"To Weybridge. I couldn't keep her, dear," Marion went on. "You see, there are the children to be considered. Now especially she wouldn't leave them."

"Send for her to-morrow," said James, emphatically, "nurse, children, the whole lot of them. She can't stay in that house alone after what has happened. I shall be glad to have them. I'm fond of children."

"You are not," said Marion.

"My dear!"

"They get on your nerves and upset you. You're not used to them."

"I fancy I've got a wife," said James, "who pampers my nerves a great deal more than is good for them."

The wife in question smiled a flat denial of the accusation, her calm eyes looking straight into his; and eventually it was agreed that Marjorie and her children should be invited to stay with them, at any rate until something had been arranged—a

phrase which they were both willing, for the present, to leave conveniently vague.

At half-past ten Marion rose, gave a small yawn, and announced her intention of going to bed. She picked up two or three books from a side table, kissed her husband, and went towards the door. On her way she turned suddenly—a quick blush on her face—came rustling back to him, and kissed him again.

"Don't be long," she said. Then she went.

CHAPTER IX

At eleven o'clock on the following morning, in pursuit of his undertaking to "make some inquiries," James Baker ascended the not conspicuously snowy steps of the publishing house of Clarke, Thornton & Co. He was slightly acquainted with Thornton—had met him once or twice at Villiers' house—and was admitted without delay to the invigorating presence of that gentleman. The latter rose, as he entered, from a desk whose hopeless disarray had frequently worried the susceptible nerves of Villiers, and greeted him heartily. Heartiness was spontaneous with him and difficult to control. Nothing caused him greater distress than the necessity, too often forced upon him by his position, to brush the pleasing bloom of fresh enthusiasm from some misguided aspirant to literary distinction. No such unpleasant duty appeared to be foreshadowed on the present occasion, and he was therefore free to give full expansion to his natural amiability.

"This is real good luck, Mr Baker. Upon my soul, I'm delighted! You're one of the people one sees too little of. You find me in rather a mess, I'm afraid. But sit down, do"—removing a pile of papers from an easy-chair and dropping them on the floor. "Now what can I do for you? Have you brought me a volume of sonnets?"

The perfect security indicated by his beaming countenance, as he put the last inquiry, appealed suddenly and irresistibly to James's sense of humour.

"No, I haven't," he answered, with a frank burst of laughter; "but I should like to see how you'd take it if I *had*."

The publisher was delighted. His hearty laugh responded to James's with vigorous enjoyment. "Fairly had!" he cried. "You leave me without a loophole! To be honest, Mr Baker, we don't publish poetry; and, in your ear, I may add that I've more than a doubt whether I know good from bad."

"Then we shan't quarrel on the subject," said James. He took the easy-chair. "I haven't come to add to your professional embarrassments, Mr

Thornton, or to your accumulation of—" A glance at the prevailing disorder.

"Litter," said Thornton, "litter."

"Nor to waste your time," proceeded James, blandly; "though, on that point, appearances may be against me. My errand is rather a peculiar one. I want to know if you can tell me what has become of Villiers?"

"What?" exclaimed Mr Thornton.

"Just what I say. He has vanished."

"Good lord!" said the publisher.

His face had changed. "You are not altogether surprised?" said James, watching him.

"Not quite that. I knew it, but I didn't see it —if you grasp the distinction. You don't, I hope, fear—?" His voice dropped.

"Suicide? Not in the least," said James.

"That's a relief! You startled me. Villiers is an inscrutable being at times."

"Undoubtedly," replied his relative, with conviction. "What do you know?"

"Precious little, I'm sorry to say." He started to rummage in his pigeon-holes. "Practically nothing. I ran across him yesterday in the street—somewhere in Holborn."

"The deuce you did!" said James. "If he was in London yesterday, the probability is that he's not very far from London to-day."

"I wouldn't even say that. He told me he was going away. But he was vague, decidedly. Now, why did I get the idea of the Mediterranean?" He stopped his search and pressed the tips of his fingers to his brow. "Ah! He hinted at local colour; and we've got into the habit of going to the South with him."

James was inclined to think that the local colour was not particularly likely to have a determining influence upon his brother-in-law's movements for the present; but he kept the opinion to himself.

"He struck me as being a bit off colour," proceeded the publisher, resuming his quest among the pigeon-holes; "nothing definite—but hardly up to the mark. And he gave me the address of his solicitors. Dear me! I seem to have mislaid it."

"I know them," said James: "Markham, Flood & Spindle. Spindle is the active man. I must go and see him."

"No good," said Thornton, with a decided, but sympathetic, shake of his head; "professional confidence."

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," said James, with a laugh. He rose, not without a perceptible effort, from the easy-chair. "But we live in moving times, Mr Thornton, and to my mind the only sound policy is to keep going straight on, whatever gets in the way. In matters of business I'll undertake to say that, nine times out of ten, the frontal attack will capture the position two or three days before the flanking movement crawls out of the mountains."

"Unless it gets mixed up with the barbed wire," commented the publisher, smiling.

"That's likely enough in this case," agreed James. "But because you probably won't get what you want by asking for it, doesn't alter the fact that you certainly won't if you don't."

"You'll start at fifty to one," said Thornton, with brisk enjoyment, as he shook hands, "rather than scratch the brute?"

"Every time," said James; and, as he descended the stairs, he was followed for two flights by the publisher's hearty laughter.

When he had said that he knew the firm of Markham, Flood & Spindle, James used the expression in the sense that he knew who they were.

He had no personal acquaintance with any of the partners. However, when he approached the offices and came plump into a gentleman who was emerging from the door at a pace which tempted you to look for his registered number, he knew sufficient of Mr Spindle by report to hazard the inquiry that he was addressing the owner of that name. Mr Spindle stopped dead, the monocle flashed to his eye, and for two seconds the whole of Mr Baker's person came under a penetrating scrutiny. Then the solicitor set off again at the same rate as before, conveying by a quick, but not discourteous, gesture that James was at liberty to accompany him if he wished, an invitation which the latter accepted at some personal inconvenience.

Yes, he was Mr Spindle. At the moment he was exceedingly busy. Would his interlocutor be so good as to favour him with his name and the nature of his business? Indeed! He was glad to make Mr Baker's acquaintance. Yes, he was in possession of Mr Villiers' present address, but he regretted he was not at liberty to disclose it. He should be happy, however, to forward any letters which Mr Baker might wish to send. He might add that he was not unprepared to be approached

by the family of Mrs Villiers. He was fully instructed; and Mr Baker would understand him if he were to suggest that, for the purpose of any future communication, it would be more regular if he were to avail himself of the medium of his solicitors.

Whereupon Mr Spindle dropped his eye-glass, wished him a curt good-morning, and darted across the street, leaving James with rather the impression that a hurricane had passed over him and removed his top canvases.

But he felt not the least aggrieved. On the contrary, his heart warmed with a sympathetic glow of admiration. "Sound man of business!" he commented mentally, as he stopped to recover his breath, and watched the solicitor's rapidly retreating figure. "Doesn't waste time when a thing has no money in it. Wish I had him to travel in Lancashire." And he thought, with a twinge of regret, of the conscientious but somewhat cumbrous methods of the elderly man of affairs (whom he would not for the world have deserted) who, for more than a generation, had solemnly steered his family barque through legal waters.

CHAPTER X

NEVERTHELESS, in this particular instance, James was fain to confess that the frontal attack had signally failed, and by the time he took his way back to Hampstead, the details of an indubitable and insidious flanking movement were already fermenting in his brain.

It was the furtherance of this design which was responsible for the fact that, when Marion arrived home a few minutes after her husband, she found him scanning his book-shelves with an expression of considerable perplexity and concern. And, indeed, it was no easy matter, as he was beginning to find out, to select, from his motley collection of sporting novels and out-of-date biographies and gazetteers, any volumes which might reasonably pass muster as being of immediate and urgent necessity to Villiers.

His wife's greeting chased away the furrows on his face and re-established its accustomed serenity.

She was dressed in furs, and the chill outside air had given her a colour: certainly, from her little sable toque to the tips of her pointed shoes, a far more desirable object to look upon than a flat block of dull morocco and faded cloth, even to a man of literary tastes, which James was not.

"Why, you're late, little woman," said he. "Have you been to Weybridge?"

"I've been there all day."

"How did you find her?"

"Resigned," said Marion, "but very sorrowful, poor child. James, I am beginning to feel very angry with Norman. I don't think he has behaved rightly, whatever his excuse. Perhaps he didn't know how much she would feel it."

"Rightly!" exclaimed James. He was amazed. "He has behaved abominably."

"It is the loss of him which hurts her so much," proceeded Marion. "His probable unfaithfulness she hardly thinks about. If he had stayed with her, I think she could have forgiven that—gladly."

James considered it incumbent upon him to be shocked. "My dear!" he said.

"I am perfectly serious, James. In the circumstances—knowing what she knows now—I think

she could have been content, I think she could even have been glad, that it should be so."

This was beyond everything. James had all the middle-class respect for accepted tenets, and his wife's present observations seriously jarred upon it. That married couples should occasionally fail to agree, should occasionally separate and form new attachments, was a condition of human affairs which he was sufficiently man-of-the-world to accept without blinking. But that a man should live with his wife and be unfaithful with her consent! Gracious heavens! it would be a living scandal! Against which his stolid soul revolted unspeakably.

He cleared his throat judiciously: a sure indication that he had apprehended a necessity to instil into his wife's crude ideas some corrective wisdom from the deeper wells of his masculine intelligence.

But Marion knew the symptoms and made haste to intercept him. She tapped him on the shoulder with the handle of her umbrella. "Don't look so solemn," she said. "You men have a very rigid standard of social ethics, and you pat one another on the back a great deal in consequence, and think you are very wise and virtuous; but that doesn't make it infallible in every case. Because macaroni

cheese is a generally wholesome food," she added, mischievously, "it doesn't follow that it is the best nutriment for a man with a liver."

"It all depends upon the way it's made," said James, with lofty affectation of impersonal comment. "By-the-by, we haven't had any lately."

"We haven't," said Marion. She began to smile; then she caught his eye and the smile broke into a laugh; and finally they both laughed together —happily, joyously, like two children.

"Did you tell her to pack up and come here?" said James.

"Yes; they are coming on Friday. It is all rather difficult to arrange. The servants, for instance—whether they are to be dismissed. None of the neighbours know anything as yet."

"And need not," said James, with decision. "Unless Norman goes back there, neither shall Marjorie. Then their tongues can wag with as little profit as usual, and with less harm. As for the servants, put them on board wages for the present. We must do everything we can to make things cheerful for our little lady—take her to theatres, drive her about, try to turn her thoughts. I'm beginning to doubt very shrewdly whether we shall

succeed in inducing this husband of hers to see the error of his ways."

"You thought so before."

"I think so more now. There seems to have been a confounded deliberation about all his plans. I've been to see Thornton to-day—nice fellow Thornton! He said Norman had told him he was going away and had left his solicitors' address for letters. He seemed to think he intended to go to the Mediterranean, though I can't say I saw much in his reasoning. Then I went and saw Spindle—smart man, Spindle! He knows exactly how everything stands—the whereabouts of Norman included. Uncommonly little he doesn't know, I should say."

"Of course he didn't tell you?" said Marion.

"No, he didn't tell me," said James. "But I haven't done with him yet." His genial countenance broadened, and Marion caught an indubitable smile.

"What are you going to do?" said she.

"Trick him," replied James, with delight.

" 'Smart man, Spindle!' " said Marion, laughing.

"Yes, my dear," returned James, with com-

posure; "but I've discounted the smartness and I fancy I can still show a margin of profit. We may not be able to run Norman to earth all at once, but I see a fair chance of getting on his track. To begin with, we can communicate with him any moment we like, through Spindle. Now, if we send a letter for him, whether he is in London or Kamtchatka, it will be dropped into the nearest pillar-box, and we shall be no wiser."

"Yes, I see," said Marion. "So you want to send something bulky and then watch the office?"

"Of course!" said James. "I'd double the screw of a clerk who could grasp things as quickly as you. It will teach us something, at any rate. If he's in the country, they'll send it by parcel post or by rail; if he's abroad, they won't forward it at all, I should say, without special instructions from him; if he's in London, it will probably be delivered by hand."

"It may be successful," said Marion; "but it seems rather mean."

"Is it?" said James. "Perhaps it is." His face clouded.

"But I think we'll do it," said Marion, suddenly, laughing.

"Then it's not mean," said James, with decision. "Books are the best things for the purpose. I think you had better go out to Weybridge again to-morrow and bring two or three of his own." He waved his hand contemptuously to his own shelves: "There's nothing here."

"Neither is there there," said Marion, smiling; "he has taken them."

"What hasn't he done in the way of cold-blooded preparation?" said James, resignedly. "Well, we must take the best of the material here. If we wrap them up in brown paper, it won't be of vast consequence, after all, what the books are about." He pricked up his ears at a sound from the hall. "What's that? Good gracious, my dear, do you know that dinner is going in?" He bolted from the room and up the stairs, taking two steps at a time, a method of ascent which he only adopted on occasions of singular urgency.

Later in the evening the parcel was made up. As Marion tied the string she suddenly gave vent to a ripple of laughter.

"What's the matter?" said James.

"I'm wondering what Norman will think when he opens it," said she.

Afterwards James wrote a note to Mr Spindle and slipped it under the string. Then he stood up, the fingers of one hand touching the completed parcel, and looked across at his wife.

"You must understand, my dear," said he, "that I take no part—that I take not one step in bringing these two together again upon any such terms as you hinted at this afternoon."

Marion raised her eyes and looked deep into his, and a soft light of sympathy—the sympathy that is born of years of mutual understanding—gradually flooded and filled her own. Without speaking, she placed a hand on each of his shoulders and kissed him on the mouth.

On the following day James had an interview with his office-boy in his private room, resulting in the transfer of the brown-paper parcel to the custody of that eminent being. No news of its subsequent fortunes reached him up to the time he left the City. But in the evening, as he and Marion were sitting at dessert, a maid entered to say that a young man from the office had called to see him.

James looked across at his wife. "Show him in," he said.

"In here, sir?" said the maid, with some surprise.

"Yes," replied James, "in here."

The maid went on her errand. A few moments later a callow youth of seventeen, who appeared to find his new environment somewhat overpowering, was impelled, rather than shown, into the room. The door was closed behind him, and he stood just within it, twisting his cap in his hands.

James interviewed him while he cracked his nuts. "That you, Chambers?" he said. He was sitting with his back to the door.

"Yes, sir," replied Chambers.

"Come further in; I can't hear you."

The youth raised his eyes and took a hasty glance at his surroundings. The glance comprehended little beyond Marion's white neck and shoulders, seen across a vivid array of fruit and flowers; and his step forward compressed itself within the most modest of limits.

"Had a pleasant afternoon?" proceeded James.

"Not over and above, sir," replied Chambers, truthfully.

"Did you deliver the parcel?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what happened?"

"I waited about best part o' the afternoon, sir,"

"Cold, was it?"

"A bit nippy," said Chambers.

"Did you see anything more of the parcel?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy; "there was a young man come out of the office, about tea-time, carrying of it."

"Sure it was the same one?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did he do?"

"He called a cab and got in."

"Oh!" This was an eventuality which James hadn't thought of. "And what did *you* do?"

"I went after him, sir."

"On foot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you take a cab?"

"Hadn't got no money, sir."

"A sound reason," pronounced James. He poured out his first half-glass of Burgundy. "Get on, my boy. I want to know where you went."

"We turned down Oxford Street," said Chambers. "It was middlin' full, so they didn't get on so fast but what I could keep up with 'em. We went about 'arf a mile, and then we turned to the

left through a lot o' little streets. I had to be slippy round the corners, sir."

"So you would," said James.

"And the reg'lar runners, sir, wot was 'anging about, they larfed at me, cos there wasn't no luggage."

"Very impolite," said James.

"We come out somewhere near 'yde Park Corner," proceeded the youth, "and I followed 'em down Knightsbridge, and then they turned to the left again. They didn't lose no time, sir, when they was clear of the traffic, and I was pretty near losing sight of 'em, when they pulled up before a great red 'ouse."

James tasted the Burgundy to hide his satisfaction. "Yes," he said; "what then?"

"I was a bit blowed, sir."

"So you sat on a step to get your breath back?"

"No, sir, it was agin an area railing."

"Bless the boy!" exclaimed James. "Did you take the address of the house?"

"Yes, sir," cried Chambers, with sudden animation, "like wot you told me, sir."

James held out his hand for the slip of paper

which the youth extracted from his pocket. He glanced at it and placed it beneath his plate.

"Well, Chambers, have you got a young woman?"

Chambers sheepishly admitted the fact. "Down Brixton way, sir," he added, as if the neighbourhood brought some extenuation.

"You've no right to, at your age." He threw him a sovereign. "Take her into the country to-morrow and tell her she's a young fool, like yourself. That'll do, my boy, that'll do!" He held up his hand as the youth was beginning to stammer his thanks. "Close the door behind you."

Before he could obey this injunction, however, Marion had risen, had snatched a pile of fruit from the table and poured it into his arms. "Take these," she said, beaming with smiles, "take them home with you. They will give you your supper downstairs. And if ever you should happen to be in trouble, come and tell me."

Never had Chambers been so near so fine a lady, never had he known one so gracious. The perfume of her presence intoxicated him, the sweetness of her smile completely scattered whatever remnants of self-possession he still retained. Marion

opened the door for him, gently checked the stuttering phrases that were rising to his lips, and left him to descend to the basement in a daze of happiness, from which, it is to be feared, he emerged with a very serious rival to the Brixton young lady installed in his heart.

Marion came quickly back, her sweet face flushed and smiling, and seated herself unceremoniously on her husband's knee.

"Oh!" said James.

She administered a smart tap to his cheek. "I'm not so heavy as that," she said.

James was bubbling with self-satisfaction. "My dear, I'm inclined to think I've missed my vocation; I ought to have gone into the private inquiry business."

"Or the boy should," said Marion. "You made a mistake in not remembering he might want money for a cab."

"So I did," said James, truthfully. "It might have been awkward." His face fell. The success of his scheme had pleased him, as such little things have a way of pleasing, for their wheedling suggestion of qualities to our credit other than those we have grown accustomed to the possession of.

Marion felt a gush of compunction for her rather ruthless demolishment of the little card-house he had been tentatively building, and as some compensation she dropped her soft cheek on his shoulder. The minutes passed while it rested there. James was not a man who wore his heart on his sleeve, but this sort of thing was secretly exceedingly pleasant to him. Probably he didn't quite realise how completely his life was filled by this one woman, how infinite would be the vacuum were she withdrawn from it.

Presently he raised his hand and gently smoothed her hair. The intimate position was gradually producing in him a very conscious heart-hunger for some soft avowal. But he was a bad fisher; and it was with considerable shamefacedness that he finally dropped his line:

"So you are not quite tired of your fat old husband?"

"You are not fat," said Marion, valiantly, lifting her head.

"You still love him a bit?"

The white arms went round his neck. "Ever so much," said Marion.

CHAPTER XI

"She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red."

THERE was no slipshod slurring of the lines, no lifeless incapacity to feel them. Every syllable told, every word rang with the full force of the poet's meaning in Rosamond's clear soprano. The last notes hung in the air, vibrating, when she ceased.

"How that man must have felt those lines when he wrote them!" said Norman.

Rosamond closed the piano. "He *knew* it," she said.

"Lord, yes!" said Norman.

She crossed the room and sat down beside him, then slipped her hand into his. "So do *we*, Norman," she said, softly.

Norman did not answer immediately. His ears were still filled with the song, and his mind was wandering along a train of thought induced by it. "I wonder?" he said, at last.

Rosamond looked up, a little startled. "Why?" she said. "Why do you wonder?"

"Have we ever quite got there?" said Norman, slowly.

She snuggled closely in to him, as if to shelter herself from even the suggestion of a doubt on the subject. "Oh, yes," she said, "yes."

Norman gave a little dry laugh. He was still following his own thoughts. "Of course, the mere fact that one questions," he said, "is an answer in the negative." He put his arm caressingly round her. "We love one another very dearly, sweetheart; we couldn't get along without one another; but it isn't quite"—he waved his hand towards the piano—"that."

Rosamond was silent for a few moments. Then suddenly, with a ripple of laughter, she stretched her beautiful form across him and took his head between her hands. Her smiling lips were very close to his. "Oh, very well, dear old boy, since you *will* have it so, perhaps it isn't quite—that. But

it's something very much like it, so much like it that I never want anything else."

"Really, Rosamond?" said Norman. "Really?"

"Really and really." The dark eyes looked at him with bewitching gravity as she repeated the words with emphasis. Then she drew his face to her own and kissed him, lingeringly, on the lips.

It was early afternoon, and they were sitting in Rosamond's room. Villiers had come across after lunch, a thing he had done, notwithstanding the first evening's prohibition, every day since his arrival. Besides that, he had spent three whole evenings, out of seven, in Rosamond's society, so that the original intention to live upon terms of infrequent association seemed, up to the present, only distantly likely to be fulfilled. To-day, however, Villiers felt an inclination to write. He attempted to rise from the corner of the couch where Rosamond had imprisoned him.

"Let me go, dear," he said, "I must get back to work."

"Bother work!" said Rosamond. She didn't move an inch. "You're always working."

"My dear little girl, do you know how much I've done since I've been here? Ten sheets. Think of

it. Perhaps fifteen hundred words. What a record for a week's work of a full-grown man!"

"What does it matter? You've been turning out books for the last four years as hard as you can. Is there to be no respite? From the bottom of a page to the top of another. Is there to be no end to it—ever?"

"Not now, at all events," said Norman. "Up to the present I have been writing from inclination—at any rate, not entirely from necessity. But now it will take the whole of my private means, and the royalties from my previous books, to pay the allowance I am going to make Marjorie. So I shall have to buckle-to, you see, Rosamond," he concluded, smiling, "unless I want to starve."

"You won't do that," said she. "Your name is a continual feast. Any rotten little tales you like to write will be accepted by the magazines and well paid for."

"Yes, it is easy to prostitute one's name in that way," said Norman, "until it isn't worth the paper it's written on."

"Dearest, I do so want you to stay," said Rosamond, softly, returning to the attack. "I've nothing on earth to do until five o'clock, when I have

to go and look at the dresses at Lady Clifford's 'At Home.' I've been counting on it—got all my stuff done; all the week I've meant to have this afternoon—for you."

But Norman still made a struggle. "Don't look at me like that," he said. "I can't resist it. Heaven knows, I want to stay. And I really mustn't. I can never do any decent work unless I'm wound up to it, and just at present I feel in the vein. I oughtn't to miss the chance. At least half a dozen pages are rioting in my head at this moment, clamouring to be written. If I stay with you now, they'll sink into the limbo—hopelessly, irretrievably."

"Poor little pages!" said Rosamond. "You make me feel quite pathetic. Let us erect a monument to them in kisses and champagne—the little pages that never were written. Doesn't it make you feel sad?"

"Rosamond, you are almost cruel."

"Oh, no," she said, softly, "you know that isn't true." She was smoothing his cheeks between her hands. "But I foresee that this work is going to be a serious rival, and I must have a clear understanding with it. I don't grudge it so many hours

a day—five, six, seven, I won't be stingy; but I won't let it make any arbitrary rules as to which those hours are to be, and I won't allow it to cross my threshold and flaunt itself in my face, as it is doing now." She waved her hand across his eyes. "I never let my work cast its shadow before, as you do," she proceeded; "I don't worry about it, in and out of season; I just sit down when it happens to be convenient, and get it done with. I write when *I* like, not when *it* likes."

Norman didn't answer at once. He hadn't been listening to her very closely. He came back slowly from a tentative excursion into the realms of his imagination. "I couldn't write like that, dear," he said, then. "Probably it wouldn't be worth reading, if I could."

Rosamond burst into a delighted peal of laughter. "Of all the abominably tactless, hopeless, idiotic things to say!" she cried. "You can't refuse to stay now. It will take you at least the rest of the afternoon to make your peace." She leaned heavily upon him. He could feel the beat of her heart through the warm bosom which caressed him with its weight. Her luminous eyes

wore a look infinitely appealing. "Stay," she breathed.

"Of course I shall stay," cried Norman, almost impatiently. "No man of flesh and blood—or stone, or iron, or ice, for that matter—could do anything else when you ask like that. Of course I shall stay. I believe if an angel from heaven came down—supposing they make them masculine—he would stay, if you asked in that way."

Rosamond sprang up with a cry of delight, like a happy child, as pleased by the tribute to her charms as with the success of her appeal. "Then don't dare to run away while I change my gown," she exclaimed. "I won't be long."

Why a woman must necessarily change her dress after lunch is one of those things which to a mere man can never be satisfactorily demonstrated.

She betook herself into the adjoining room, leaving open the communicating door, so that she could shout intermittent observations through the aperture. Norman had occasional glimpses of her as she crossed the field of his vision, framed by the doorway, in various stages of deshabille. He hardly noticed her. Little things were beginning to knock at the door of his private tabernacle

somewhat sharply. He had never attempted to deceive either himself or others with the idea that he had been endowed with any especial capacity for personal rectitude. He found himself with a somewhat exceptional constitution to deal with, but hitherto he had contrived to preserve his self-respect; he had done nothing to carry him below his own standard of the behaviour demanded of him. Even his treatment of his wife appeared to him to be justified by the particular circumstances which had brought it about. Now he perceived a difference. The stimulus to work was still upon him. He felt the call of the fair white sheets, waiting for him in his room across the landing, as he had not felt it since the momentous step had been taken which brought him to Albany Mansions. He knew that this afternoon, whose hours were to be dedicated to the worship of that exacting goddess whose claims are never satisfied, could have produced the best that was in him. And he began to realise, dimly as yet, whither he was sinking.

"The cigarettes are in the little cabinet under the window," Rosamond called out.

Villiers got up. He shook himself free of his thoughts, almost physically, as a dog shakes water

from its back. Having given the go-by to his conscience, he undertook to do it handsomely.

"And if you want some champagne," shouted Rosamond again, dragging pins from her hair and digging them in again, "there's a bottle or two somewhere. Hunt about for it."

Norman lighted a cigarette and proceeded to move leisurely about the room. The course of his perambulations brought him to Rosamond's Sheraton bureau, which was lying open, littered with papers. He picked up a long sheet of proof and glanced at it casually. Something held his attention and he read on, his whole face gradually assuming an expression of comic perplexity.

He was so employed when Rosamond, smiling and radiant, came back into the room, humming the refrain of a ballad. She was now attired in a loose *crêpe-de-chine* tea-gown of palest grey. And it was easy to see that she had disencumbered herself of those conventional barbarities, corsets.

"Why do you write in this wonderful way, Rosamond?" said Norman, without looking up, and with a gleam of unmistakable enjoyment somewhere in the recesses of his eyes.

Rosamond resented this calm investigation of

her private papers much less than the quite incidental fact, resulting from it, that her undeniably exquisite aspect in the grey gown had for the moment passed without notice. "Put down that paper," she commanded. She made a snatch at the slip.

Norman held it out of her reach, laughing. "I suppose you really do understand the meaning of words?"—with chaffing semi-diffidence.

"Put it down," cried Rosamond, again; but she was smiling.

"I mean," continued Norman, ruthlessly, "you realise that a dress which is made of substantial quantities of muslin, lace, silk-brocade and other odds and ends isn't exactly 'created,' and cannot, without considerable torture, even be said to be 'expressed'? And it's rather an original notion, isn't it, to talk of a blouse as a 'theme'?" He threw down the slip. "What language is it, sweetheart? It isn't English—not even journalese."

"Modistese," said Rosamond, with a laugh, "I suppose. I have to do it. The shops like it."

"What of that? You've nothing to do with the shops."

"Oh, haven't I? If you compare my puffs with the advertisement pages, you may come to a different conclusion."

"Is there anything honest in the world?" said Norman, sententiously.

"Most noble Cæsar, are your books honest?"

Norman climbed down leisurely. "No," he admitted, when he reached the bottom, "not quite."

"You *daren't* make them honest. You have to write what the public is willing to read."

"Not quite that," said Norman, "rather what a noisy section of the public is willing to let the rest read."

"It comes to the same thing. We all have to cut our coat to the cloth in the end. But some of us are rather superior sometimes." She smiled at him with a delicious suggestion of triumph, and gave him a playful flick with her hand. "Is the door fastened?"

"Yes," replied Norman.

Rosamond seated herself in a corner of the couch. "And have you turned the card to 'Out'?"

Norman had done that also.

"Then pass the cigarettes, and let us enjoy ourselves."

Norman obeyed the injunction, and then lighted another himself. He took the opposite corner of the couch, and Rosamond immediately availed herself of the fact to place her dainty feet upon his lap. The novelist dutifully slipped his fingers through the open front of one of the pointed shoes and lightly stroked the top of her instep. It was a form of homage which Rosamond found particularly soothing.

"If you get tired of doing that one, Norman," she said, sweetly, dropping her head on the cushion and blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, "you can do the other."

Two hours later, as Rosamond was descending the stairs on her way to Lady Clifford's "At Home," she met a pleasant-featured gentleman of comfortable build coming up, who was apparently finding the steep ascent by no means to his taste. She gave him a glance as she passed, and he gave her two. But that was not an exceptional experience with Rosamond.

CHAPTER XII

VILLIERS returned to his room feeling much as a dog may be assumed to feel when it creeps back to its kennel after a night's foraging; and the knowledge that such was his mental attitude—a knowledge impressed upon him in especially uncompromising terms when he opened his door and saw the orderly preparation for work—increased its acuteness. There was an atmosphere, a perfume in Rosamond's room, which to some extent drugged his moral sense and restrained his conscience from obtruding comments too flagrantly crude. But in the appearance of his own possessions, the evidences of his individuality and his work—the half-dozen written pages (the ink long dry) spread upon his table, the little pad of fresh sheets carefully cut and margined to the left of his blotting-pad, the heavy books of reference crowding the shelves and overflowing upon the floor (from amongst which, it might be observed, James's

three sporting novels detached themselves, with almost plaintive insistence, like notes of interrogation)—in all this there was nothing to cast a soothing gloss upon realities, and to hide him from the white, penetrating rays of his self-despite.

He could not work. That was out of the question. The spell of the soft goddess was too near him; the purple glamour of her rites still flushed his brain with too giddy an actuality. He went to the windows and threw them wide open. The room was not close, but he felt the need of air. Out into the raw November atmosphere he thrust head and shoulders. Where was he drifting? If these wasted hours were to be taken as a sample of what was likely to happen in the future—and he conceived little prospect of anything else if Rosamond's influence continued to be exercised as it had been that afternoon—to what length of time could he look forward before self-respect became a thing of the past and sound work an impossibility? He saw his talents made increasingly subservient to her humours, himself a mere plaything to minister to her whims, as and when the fancy took her. And against that destiny the whole moral nature of the man rebelled passionately—rebelled while recog-

nising the galling and humiliating truth that it was linked to a physical weakness which could make such rebellion impotent.

Against Rosamond herself he launched no unjust reproaches. Individuals calling themselves men, at moments of their lives corresponding with that which Norman was passing through, are sometimes guilty of reproach of that kind. For such miserable cowardliness there is no word in the English language sufficiently contemptuous. Norman knew that his enemy was not Rosamond, but was chained up within himself, and would accompany him wherever he chose to go; that he had himself only to reckon with, and that the future course of his life, in all probability, lay in the issue of that struggle.

Presently he drew in his head and closed the casement. The sun had already sunk out of the cold sky, leaving but a faint yellow afterglow, veiled to Norman by the smoke hanging heavily over intervening chimney-pots. The room had dusked since he turned away, so he switched on the electric light. He noticed, as he did so, that someone was shuffling in the lobby and fumbling for the handle of the door. Thinking it was the

maid with tea, he pulled it open, and confronted James, blinking at him.

"That you, Norman?" said he, cheerily. "Glad I haven't climbed those steps for nothing. But what a cave of the winds you live in, man! Shut some of those windows. Look at your fire, it's smoking atrociously."

Norman scrutinised the genial figure of his brother-in-law with considerable displeasure.

"How have you got here?" he said. "I left no address." Then suddenly a light broke upon him, and his features relaxed into a partly contemptuous smile. "I see; this explains those ridiculous books?"

"Perfectly true," said James, blandly. "They are books I value, I assure you, but, rather than that you should feel any grievance on the subject, I'll treat you squarely and make you a present of them." He strode into the room and proceeded calmly to remove his overcoat, which he afterwards placed upon a chair, together with his hat and umbrella. Then he selected another, of comfortable aspect, and seated himself in it with a shiver. "The windows, Norman; do look to the windows."

Villiers closed the remaining casements and drew the curtains over them.

"After all," he said, "I suppose some such interview as this was inevitable in the long run, and it may be as well to get it over. Though, for my part," he added, crossing the room and breaking the recalcitrant fire into a blaze, "for my part, I fail to see how it is going to be profitable to anyone concerned."

"We will talk of that in a moment," said James. He was dragging at his collar and giving vent to a series of guttural sounds indicative of some laryngeal discomfort. "This sulphur has got into my throat," was the explanation he volunteered. "Have you such a thing as a whisky-and-soda?"

Norman smiled. It was impossible to remain long in James's society without being infected by his innate good-humour. "Yes, I think I can do that for you," said he. He produced a decanter and a syphon from a cupboard, and placed them, together with a tumbler, in convenient proximity to his visitor's elbow.

The latter helped himself. "Same old brand!" said he with a wry face, when he tasted it; "no

wrinkles on it. You should pack it away for ten years, Norman, and then ask me to sample it."

Norman laughed outright at that. He sat down, facing his relative across a corner of the table.

"You are one of the most wonderful men I know, James," said he. "You come here, presumably, to say a number of unpleasant things, and you start by making yourself comfortable with a whisky-and-soda; or, at least, as comfortable as the inferior quality of the whisky will permit."

"Which proves, I hope," said James, quietly, "that I haven't the least intention to say anything unpleasant." He replaced his glass on the table. "I have come simply to ask you to return to your wife, Norman. You have made the little thing very unhappy."

"That does credit to your heart," said Norman. "Of course you don't seriously suppose that I have deliberately taken a step of this nature to go back upon it within a fortnight?"

"I suppose nothing," said James. "I only ask you to look at the matter from the point of view of that poor girl."

"Heavens knows I have done that," said Norman, earnestly. "If she suffers, it is because she

placed me on a pedestal which time will make clear to her I had no right to occupy. She, too, will realise before long the madness of such a union as ours."

"Nothing mad about it," said James. "I never knew a couple better suited to one another."

"As to that," replied Norman, quietly, "I think I can claim to be in the better position to judge."

"I know what you have in your mind," said James; "to my thinking, an absurdly insufficient reason."

"Insufficient!" He repeated the word with amazed emphasis. "Insufficient! I leave my wife because I find her deficient in the first essential of marriage, in all that makes marriage, *is* marriage, in the one supreme function for which marriage was ordained; and you call that an insufficient reason?"

James took another pull at the whisky. "Don't overstate it," he said; "*one* of the functions."

"What are the others? In what else does the married state differ from the single state?"

"We marry for companionship," said James, "for sympathy."

"Obtainable at a more moderate quotation than indissoluble union. What else?"

James had not expected to be cross-examined. It had never occurred to him to dissect the causes of his own connubial content. Now that he was invited to do so, he was perhaps for the first time dimly aware of the essential base upon which the whole edifice was erected; but this was clearly not the time to lay emphasis upon that perception. He faithfully recounted the lighter boons which flowed to him from the estate of marriage.

"You want someone," he said, "to nurse you when you're sick, to look pretty at the head of your table when you have your friends to dine, and to write your private letters."

Norman smiled, a smile with the faintest tinge of sadness in it. "You are very well suited, James," he said.

"I am," said James, loyally. "Besides that, you want someone to look after your house and to manage your servants."

"Yes. You can hire a housekeeper to do all that; they're not expensive."

"If it comes to that, you can—" He thought better of it and stopped.

"I'm glad you didn't say it," said Norman.

"All the same," said James, "it's a fair argument on the line you are following."

"Is it?" said Norman. "It may be fair, but it's not an argument. It's a platitude to say that the woman who can be bought isn't worth having; it is almost as true to say that the man who would buy her isn't worth hanging."

"That's the sort of remark I should have expected you to make—a month ago," said James. "I'm willing to confess that this affair runs contrary to all my preconceived ideas about you, Norman. I've always looked upon you as one of the steadiest men I know. You don't drink—"

"I'm not a teetotaller," said Norman, "by any means."

"You don't show an intelligent interest in the subject," said James, flatly. "You don't bet, never let your tongue run away with you, never tell shady stories, never gamble at cards—"

"I don't actively object," said Norman, "if the game's bad enough It's the very worst reflection on the quality of a game, reduces it at once to the level of pitch-and-toss."

"You've never been loose or wild," added

James; "behaved like a model citizen all your life up to now. If anyone had asked me, I should have said a man without vices. And yet you suddenly bolt in front of the guns like an old retriever that no one ever thought of holding!"

He emptied his glass, and then expounded the simile: "Show yourself incapable of grasping the most elementary of moral obligations."

"Do you regard it as a moral obligation to live with a wife who has no wish for a husband?"

"She *has* a wish," said James, "a very decided one."

"For a companion," corrected Norman. "The only obligation I can see is to provide her with a home, or with the means to secure one. That I am continuing to do."

"You can talk around the point as much as you like," said James, "it doesn't alter the fact, to me, that it's the plain duty of a man to live with the woman he has married."

"And if, as in my case, the wife is no wife?"

"He must grin and bear it," said James, without hesitation.

"Probably that is what I should have done," said Norman, "had Providence seen fit to provide

me with your physical system instead of my own. Like most Englishmen, you have the luck to possess a moderate temperament, otherwise you couldn't talk as you do."

"Very likely," said James.

Norman leaned his arms on the table and looked steadily across at his brother-in-law. "Do you know that that is an inestimable blessing, which you should fall down on your knees and thank God for every day of your life?"

"My dear Norman!" said James.

"It leads you to reach a good many false conclusions. You are an excellent type of a class, James," Norman proceeded, "a numerous class which believes that all difficulties such as mine are capable of solution by the moral stiffening of the human race. Never was a greater mistake. They spring from immutable natural laws and not from vice, and no amount of educative measures, based on systematic violent opposition to those laws, can have the smallest chance of permanent effect. Look at your streets, for example."

"My streets!" said James, mildly. "I wish they were."

"You have been hammering away at them,"

continued Norman, "with very laudable perseverance, for the last two or three generations, without improving them in the slightest. That is because you decline to recognise the patent truth that these things *have to be.* They have been since the days of Abraham, and unless you are prepared to make a revolutionary change in your social system, they will continue till the world's end. You will never make any progress until you get that fundamental fact driven deep into your stolid heads."

James was not particularly concerned. It cannot be said that these were questions to which he had given much thought.

"Oh!" he interjected, without enthusiasm. "Well, since it appears to please you to abuse my head, I'll allow you to continue to abuse my stomach." He stretched out his hand to the decanter.

"I'm going to have some tea," said Norman. "Won't you wait for it?"

James helped himself. "My dear Norman," said he, with pained expostulation, "the whisky's not so bad as that."

CHAPTER XIII

NORMAN rang the bell, and presently tea was brought in and placed upon the table. He poured out a cup and stirred the sugar in it. Then, having munched a piece of buttered toast, he took up the thread of his remarks.

"'Raising the tone' is the phrase," he said. "That is to be the panacea for all unruly affections. Well, here am I, a man who, through the gradual developing process of centuries, has come out, I suppose, in a tolerably advanced state of moral and intellectual culture. How has that affected me in its bearing on the primitive instincts? It has made them the more galling, in so far as it has enabled me to recognise their baseness in relation to the qualities of the mind, and it has increased their severity in proportion as this very refinement has obliged their resistance."

"But you have not resisted them," said James.

"I resisted them until a month ago, James. But

that is really the point of the story. Possibly my case is exceptional, possibly I have reached no such delicacy of perception as I suggested; but I think you will find, if you drive it hard enough, that there must come a time when this moral culture, however highly tempered, can do no more."

He spoke very quietly—even with a little sadness. Usually his manner was inclined to be authoritative; now his fine face was turned upon James with an expression that contained almost an appeal. There began, slowly and indistinctly, to grow upon the latter some conception of the struggle he had gone through. He was conscious of a faint veering of his point of view.

"Don't suppose I can't feel for you, Norman," he said, kindly. "The luck has been against you, I admit; you've drawn a good card, but it doesn't happen to suit your hand. But that doesn't entitle you to throw it away and pick up another. You must play the game."

"Yes," said Norman, rather bitterly, "the long game. You are well up in the rules. They are all set out in the ethical code of the class we have been speaking of. It recognises, grudgingly, that nature has seen fit to implant in her children certain un-

desirable proclivities, and it prescribes marriage. It airily disregards the fact that marriage, as a rule, is out of the question until a full decade after these proclivities have become inconveniently turbulent; but that is beside the point. It tells you to marry—to make your one pick—and it gives you certain sapient advice. It says, 'It's a serious business; look carefully at the backs of the cards (certainly they are much alike); but on no account peep at the faces.' And then, when you've drawn your card, and find it the wrong one, and ask blankly what is to happen next, it tells you to 'play the game.' It's a hard game, but you set your teeth and begin to play it. And later on, perhaps, when some other cards that would have done very much better happen to lie exposed on the table, it takes them up and flaunts them in your face and says, 'You didn't know they were there; *I* took care of that; you've had your chance; play the game.' "

"I fancy I've heard something like that before," said James, "from people who didn't like the look of their helping of fortune. The system on which the affairs of the world are conducted mayn't be the best for everybody, but it suits the majority, and it has held water for nineteen hundred years."

"Yes," said Norman; "if a thing has proved on the whole endurable, it will have to do. That is the philosophy. A trifle slipshod, perhaps, but it saves trouble."

James was wise enough not to continue the discussion. He knew that, in arguing with a man who takes an extreme view upon any question, you run a risk of spoiling a good case and have no chance of improving a bad one. It has never occurred to you to analyse your own attitude of benevolent neutrality towards existing conditions, whereas you are dealing with an opponent who has made a study of his subject and has all the points at his finger ends.

"I'm not going to argue about it," he said, "I didn't come here for that. Whether the system is right or wrong, you've got to face it; and so has she, poor thing. And however I may feel for you, I feel a hundred times more for her. I've just left her, remember—or, rather, I left her this morning when I went to the City."

"Is she in your house?" interrupted Norman, sharply.

"Yes, she is," said James, defiantly.

"Permanently?"

"No; until you return."

Norman ignored the insinuation. "I don't wish her to be a burden upon anyone," he said. "There is no reason for that."

"Burden!" cried James, wrathfully. "Surely my wife can have her own sister to stay with her?"

"Yes, yes," said Norman, soothingly. He didn't understand his relative so well as Marion did. "I don't intend to say anything to hurt you, James. I only want you to understand that Marjorie is in a position to provide for herself."

James consented to be mollified. "No doubt," he said. "But just at present she is making us a visit, so I've seen a good deal of her, and I want you to be quite clear about this—whatever she may have made you put up with in the past, she is paying for now. She knew I was coming here when I left her this morning, and I wish you had seen the look in her face instead of me. I've seen nothing else all day. I see it now."

Norman made no immediate comment. He rose and poked the fire; then crossed to his writing-table and made some inconsiderable re-arrangement of the papers. At length he returned to his seat. He was plainly moved.

"I hardly realised this," he said. "I thought her attachment had become methodical—a matter of habit—nothing more."

James pressed his advantage. "That's likely enough," he said. "In the old days she was too contented to see very far into the deeper side of existence. She moved quietly about, taking the good things that came in her way pretty much as a matter of course. And inclined to be a trifle stubborn, perhaps, when little things didn't please her. It's all very different now. That poor child has awakened to realities with a vengeance. You've hit her uncommonly hard, Norman."

"James, I haven't," cried Norman, with appeal in his face. "I've taken away from her an unworthy block of humanity who was never fit to mate with her and never could be."

James shook his head. "You'd better come and try and persuade her of that," he said. "At present, I'll undertake to say, she thinks of you, not less, but a good deal more than on the day you married her. And she was tolerably happy that day, wasn't she? Don't you remember, when I sat on my hat in the vestry, and Marion refused to drive home with me?"

Well done, James! The little reminiscence was an inspiration. Norman's features brightened with almost boyish delight. "Yes," he exclaimed, with sudden gaiety, "and Marjorie had to ask you to kiss her."

"So she did," said James, not the least abashed. "Well, that's an order a woman won't tackle unless she's in moderate fettle, eh?"

"Ask Marion," said Norman, with a smile. He turned his eyes and looked into the fire, and there was a pause.

James rose and stood with his back to the hearth.

"Look here, Norman," he said, "you are both of you too good for one to care to see you make a mess of your lives. Make it up. Come back to her. She's ready to take you, and she'll overlook anything that has happened in the interval. These delicate misunderstandings have a way of growing very big, when it only needs a little plain speaking to put them right. You've cleared the air. I'll go so far to say that the lesson may do her no harm. It's not an easy thing to say, but I think you'll find she'll make an effort."

The last sentence was a tactical mistake. Nor-

man's face set. "Upon that point," he said, "you must allow me to judge."

James attempted to cover his error. "Oh, you mustn't be too exacting," he said, genially. "The women are different from us."

"So I thought," said Norman, "for eight years."

"You don't think so any longer?"

"This cumulated refinement that we were speaking of," said Norman, "is responsible for many things: among others, for the profound concealment of the truth, almost startling once it is realised, that the world is throbbing with women—good, cultured, pure women—for whom these natural laws have as deep and intense a meaning as they have for me."

"Your first opinion," remarked James, "was founded upon one woman; your second, I take it, is founded upon another. Probably both are wrong."

"No," said Norman, "both are right. Men, as a whole, are made in a mould; women run to extremes."

James returned to the charge. "Come back to her, Norman," he said again.

But the moment for that appeal to succeed—if it

had ever existed—had passed. Too strong a light had now been thrown on the white dividing line, the permanent, ineradicable difference.

"I cannot, James," said Norman, simply. "Even if I had the wish to retrace my steps, you probably realise that conditions have arisen in the meantime which make it no longer possible."

"Fiddlesticks!" said James, somewhat impatiently. "You left your wife."

"With whom I had no such tie," said Norman, quietly.

"Oh, come, my dear fellow, what does it amount to?" James glanced round the room. "You are evidently alone here. Before I came, I rather expected to find—" he hesitated "—well, what I haven't found."

Norman looked at him with a little surprise. "You don't suppose—" he began.

James held up his hand. "I want to know nothing," he said, firmly; "I make no inquiries. It's enough for me that there's no sign of any particularly definite arrangement—nothing necessarily lasting, I mean—nothing that can't be—arranged."

"Pecuniarily?" said Norman, flashing.

"No, no; I said—arranged."

"James, I have the greatest respect for you," said Norman, quietly; "but on this subject we shall never agree. We approach it from too widely dissimilar standpoints. I conceive I have contracted a very decided obligation, and it cannot be 'arranged.'"

There was finality in his tone. James crossed the room and picked up his overcoat. Norman helped him on with it in silence. Suddenly James turned round and faced him again. He was more moved than he cared to suppose himself capable of being.

"Before I go, Norman," he cried, "think again. It's for your own happiness as well as hers; it's for your own *good* as well as hers; I'm convinced of it. Upon my soul, when I think of that child's face, I could almost kneel to you. For heaven's sake, make an effort, man; don't sink without a struggle. She's your own wife, and she loves you; if she didn't know it before, she knows it now—and, damn it all! I don't believe she'll ever forget it."

Norman's face lost its sternness. He was plainly very much touched by the other's earnestness.

"You are one of the best fellows that ever lived, James," he said. "You are entitled to sniff when I

say it to you, but it is none the less true, that it involved a considerable wrench to cut myself off, as I have done, from you and Marion. I hate to be on the other side of the fence from you. But there I am, and there I must remain. I fought it all out a month ago, and now there is added this other circumstance that we were speaking of, to divide me even more widely from Marjorie. Don't think I am indifferent to her happiness. Very far indeed from that. If it had been possible to separate one's higher from one's lower nature—the mental and spiritual from the physical frame—I should never have left her; but nothing can persuade me—knowing her as I do—that it can achieve her happiness to be linked to a man of my nature, unless he lives such a life as is unbearable to him. I think she ought to divorce me, James. I don't suggest it for my sake, but for her own. She is entitled to her freedom; and there must be many men in the world—in fact, I know there are—who could value fully, and without distraction, that gentle soul of hers. As for me, I have made my bed—I don't say I'm glad, I don't say I'm sorry—but I intend to lie upon it."

CHAPTER XIV

JAMES BAKER was consistently a well-dressed man. He couldn't have been Marion's husband and anything else. A natural instinct towards neatness had been judiciously fostered by his spouse, until an orderly and well-turned-out appearance had become as essential to his happiness as his morning paper. To what extent self-respect and a passable exterior may be inter-dependent is perhaps not sufficiently recognised. As over-dressing denotes mental feebleness, so a slovenly and careless habit of clothes is not infrequently the outward and visible sign of moral deterioration.

The exceptional glossiness of his silk hats was a point upon which James especially prided himself. As he leaned forward in the hansom which was taking him home after his interview with Norman, his gloved hands hanging loosely over the doors, a particularly exquisite specimen of that eccentric

form of head-dress, set at just a fraction of a jaunty angle, came into conspicuous prominence, and could fairly have challenged comparison with the shiniest of its brethren which were passed on the way.

It cannot be said that he was in any way surprised by the failure of his mission. He had founded no great hopes upon it. Nevertheless, he alighted from the cab at his own door with considerable misgiving. That there was a quarter in which hopes were founded, and very high ones, he was painfully conscious. It occurred to him, now, that his discouragement of them might have been more decided than it had been. He remembered that the anxious face looking up at him had led him to parent an appreciably more optimistic view than his real feelings warranted.

Moreover, it appeared increasingly likely that it would fall to his own lot to disperse those hopes. That was a task he had privately assigned to Marion; but neither the sound of his latch-key, nor that of his subsequent movements—not, on this occasion, it must be owned, very strenuously subdued—brought the customary greeting of the familiar figure. He even whistled unconcernedly a few bars

from one of the airs of a musical comedy, but that also proved ineffective.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked a maid who was crossing the hall.

"She is upstairs, sir, with Mrs Villiers," replied the maid.

"In her boudoir?"

"Yes, sir."

This explained matters. Not the most persevering shuffling, not any whistle which the most generous interpreter could suppose to be taking place for the enjoyment of the whistler, could penetrate to that remote apartment. James ascended the four flights of stairs which led to it and opened the door.

The two sisters were seated before the fire, a small table between them, upon which were strewn various feminine articles—needles, scissors, strands of coloured silk, a thimble, loose odds and ends of cambric. Each had a piece of embroidery in her hands. Looking at Marjorie as she bent over her work, James wondered—as he had wondered once or twice since the estrangement—how she had come, in the first instance, to attract such a man as Norman. Her dark-brown hair was drawn

rather tightly back, leaving an unnecessary depth of forehead exposed and emphasising its narrowness. Coupled with her thin lips and somewhat too pointed nose, this gave her, in her present attitude, an aspect almost of primness. It was not until she raised her eyes, and you saw through their soft depths into her clear soul, and, especially, not until she spoke, and you came under the spell of her voice—its innate refinement, its unconscious sweetness and gentleness—that you realised, not only the beauty of her character, but the charm of her presence.

She half rose as James entered, flushed, then turned pale again and sat perfectly still. He crossed the room and occupied a chair next her.

He took the work from her hand and examined it. "Well, little Marjorie," he said, "I've seen the dragon."

Marjorie didn't look up. "Is he happy?" she said.

James was glad of the respite. He smiled jocularly. "You beat me the first time," he said. "I didn't ask him."

"Did he *seem* happy?" said Marjorie.

"Well, that's rather a difficult question to an-

swer," replied James. "I can't say he did and I can't say he didn't. Perhaps, on the whole," he added, slowly, "not quite."

Marjorie suddenly looked into his face. "What makes you say that?"

"Really, I don't know that I can precisely explain," said James. "Small hints, perhaps; nothing more. It's only an impression." He was still weakly avoiding the inevitable plunge. "Does he strike you as the kind of man who is exactly capable of *seeming* happy?"

Marjorie offered no opinion. "Is he alone?" was her next question—quite quietly; but she looked down again.

"I saw no one else," replied James. "He is living by himself in a small flat. Mind you, I don't intend to say there's no one in the background." He took her hand and stroked it. "But we *knew* that, didn't we? We knew that, you and I?"

"Oh, yes," said Marjorie, without emotion.

"And Marjorie, my dear," James continued, gently, "I think we shall have to try to get used to the idea that he is not coming back. He has no ill-will towards us, to any of us—quite the reverse. Our interview was perfectly friendly; we

talked the whole thing over from beginning to end. I put it to him, very plainly, that, in my opinion, he was behaving in a way in which he had no shadow of right to behave; but, for all that, I gave him to understand that, on our side, we were willing to make allowances and to start afresh. Well, I'm sorry to say it was no use; he talked about us all with a great deal of regret, but it appears to suit him to live differently, he thinks it's best for everybody concerned, and when Norman Villiers makes up his mind—"

He stopped. Softly, without any parade, without any breaking appeal to sympathy, the tears were falling, one by one, on Marjorie's lap. It was as if she had said that she expected no sympathy, that she felt she called for none, but that she could not but weep. It was infinitely touching.

James rose and crossed the room, and became intently absorbed in a picture of cupids gambolling about a figure of Flora. How near he came himself, at that moment, to some regrettable weakness it would never be safe to ask him. All that could be seen from the back was that he clenched his fists viciously. And, under his breath, he appeared to address some remarks to Flora, upon the subject

of Villiers, which would probably have considerably astonished that ethereal young damsel's little white ears.

The emergency of a woman's tears, it must be admitted, is one which the masculine temperament is singularly unfitted to face. But, though James had found it necessary to beat a hasty and ignominious retreat, Marjorie was not left without support. Marion crossed quietly in front of the table and sat down beside her. She gathered the drooping form into her arms and laid the bowed head upon her bosom. Marion could do nothing without grace, and her manner now was full of it. She didn't tell Marjorie not to cry; she refrained from dabbing her eyes with officious and irritating cambric; neither did she think it necessary to worry her ears with any, possibly true, but not immediately consolatory, reflections upon the subject of the ultimate benefit of present tribulation. Lightly soothing the soft brown hair, quite quietly, yet with infinite solace and tenderness in every touch, she was content to hold this stricken sister in her arms, while she wept silently, unchecked and unchided, from her poor troubled heart.

After a while she said gently: "Give him time,

dear. James says he doesn't seem to be quite happy even now, and he has only been away from you a little more than a week. Sooner or later he must tire of this new life and realise what he has lost. Then he will be very lucky if you are still ready to forgive him."

"I don't care what he has done," cried Marjorie, almost passionately, her voice choked in the lace ruffles of her sister's bodice, "or what he does, I'll wait for ever, if he'll only, only come back."

Marion softly pressed back her forlorn little head and continued to stroke it in silence. Presently she said, as if in answer to her own thoughts, "So much depends upon this other woman. You didn't see her, James?" she added, turning to her husband.

James came back to the fireplace. "Not that I know," he said. "I met one coming down the stairs as I was going up. It occurred to me that she might have been to see Norman."

"What was she like?"

"Uncommonly handsome," said James.

"Perhaps you were right, then. Was she—I hate the word—a lady?"

"She wasn't loud or flashy, if that's what you

mean," said James. "Stylishly dressed, but in good taste. Yes, I should say so, certainly."

Marion was silent for a time. "I'm sorry," she said, at length. "It will take him longer to tire. But he *will* tire; he *will* come back. He must." James said nothing, and she added, rather sharply, "Don't you think so, James?"

James had no intention to commit himself to an opinion, however. His optimism of the morning had never been very real, and his visit to Norman had operated destructively upon such little substance as it possessed. That optimism, moreover, had proved too severe a handicap, when it subsequently came to be falsified, to be lightly assumed again. He was silent, therefore, endeavouring to express to Marion, by a rather pathetically blank expression of countenance, that her interrogatory should not be pressed.

He could have plumped out a direct negative with less damaging effect. The pause on the question beat steadily into Marjorie's brain and bore to it, with dumb intensity, the stunning comprehension of her absolute loss. A rush of pain—overwhelming, uncontrollable—flooded through her. She sprang to her feet, choking back the sobs,

her wide eyes stricken and imploring, the staunched tears still wet on the lashes and on her cheeks:

"Oh, James—never? *Never?*"

It was more than James could bear. "Yes, there's one way," he cried, fiercely, "I can go and carry him here. And if you say the word, *I'll do it.*"

CHAPTER XV

MARJORIE did not call upon James to carry his formidable threat into practice. On the other hand, it cannot be said that she turned with a conscious effort to "face the music." She continued to live, since live she must—that was all. She looked forth upon a world drab, featureless, blank. Her daily life became a routine, without energy and without colour. Meals with her, at this time, were a periodic ceremony and nothing more. To poor James it grew to be a matter of almost painful concern to watch her knife and fork pecking for a few minutes, with obvious and distracting inutility, among the food on her plate, only to be laid quietly down when the effort had lasted as long as politeness demanded—hardly a morsel eaten—and the plate carried away. He would make careful and lengthy dives into some dish in front of him, in search of an especial tit-bit, and dab it tentatively but hopefully on her plate, when found; which

Marjorie, in order to please him, would almost choke herself in the heroic endeavour to eat. There was no conscious listlessness about her; but a heavy extraneous weariness settled on her and pervaded all her actions. Her occasional valiant efforts to join cheerfully and naturally in conversation were almost sadder than her silence; her cheeks became pinched and pale; and she came down every morning with eyes which had plainly slept little and wept much.

But she was far from attempting to inflict her sorrows upon others; she uttered no complaints; the subject of her troubles was never referred to unless directly introduced from outside. She attended to the welfare and the clothing of her two little girls; sent them daily on their accustomed walks with their nurse; listened to their chatter, talked to them, played with them, sympathetically, but without spirit. It was a quality of her temperament—as perhaps it is with many of us—that she was unable to appraise the full value of a good in secure possession. Norman had seemed little to her until his place was left empty. Now, though she bore to her children all that wonderful mother-love that is given to women, their presence at her side could not coun-

terbalance—it could hardly alleviate—her loss. Sometimes she would seize one or other of them in a sudden spasm of affection, and leave the startled little face wet with her tears. The next moment she would put it gently aside and return to her manner of settled sadness.

During this time James and Marion did all in the power of mortals to turn her thoughts. She understood the kindness which prompted those efforts and did her utmost to respond. The struggle required, however, invariably reacted in a depression of her spirits even below their normal level. And the single, steadfastly present idea could not be exorcised even for a moment. Between the acts at a theatre, walking in Regent Street, driving through the Strand, in a Bond Street tea-room, when she was not absorbed, she was furtively scanning the people about her, with half-frightened hope, in search of one familiar figure. It became by degrees her one distraction, all that raised her out of the dead level of a drab existence—that trembling hope of catching a glimpse in the crowd, at some moment in the course of months, of years, of a clear-featured, thoughtful, resolute face. What she would do if her search should prove suc-

cessful probably she hardly knew herself. It was at such times that Marion endeavoured to instil into her the doctrine of the fish in the sea. It was a doctrine which found in Marjorie, it must be said, a singularly unfavourable soil to take root in.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate for Marjorie at this period that she had never been enthusiastically absorbed by the, usually, feminine distraction of frocks and frou-frous. She accompanied Marion upon her shopping excursions in the West End, but her interest in the subject, at the best of times spasmodic and evanescent, was not now to be provoked by the most alluring display of modistic delights. Her method of clothing herself had always been of the simplest—which is not to say the most economical. Any article of attire which happened to attract her wandering fancy of the moment she bought recklessly, irrespective of price. If it suited her afterwards, she wore it; if—as generally happened—it didn't, she discarded it at once and without a qualm. And usually she chose to wear habitually the most unbecoming of her purchases. It was a method which involved an amount of wanton waste which had always jarred considerably upon Norman's nerves, and it did not even possess

the saving virtue of being able to afford her a trivial outlet for her thoughts, now that they were running too persistently in one consuming channel.

Poor Marjorie! She did all in her power to keep her troubles to herself and to be the least possible nuisance to those about her; but, for all that, it must be confessed that the effect of her presence on the Baker household was emphatically the reverse of invigorating. Possibly there is no more depressing influence than the constant society of one for whom life has lost its savour and the earth its *raison d'être*. Even Marion's calm nature began to be affected by the unchanging atmosphere of subdued melancholy in which she lived. As for James, it appeared to him, as the days went on, that the hearty appetite he enjoyed was decidedly offensive; his post-prandial cigar and half-glass of Burgundy became things to be indulged in apologetically and in retreat, after the ladies had retired to the drawing-room. He arrived at the conclusion, in short, that a state of affairs had been reached for which a remedy must somehow be found.

In these circumstances, his mind turned to that curative agent in whose universal beneficent powers

the sturdy British character reposes unshakable faith, in spite of steady rebuffs—the medical man.

"She had better see someone," he said to Marion, a fortnight after his visit to Norman.

"A doctor?" said Marion.

"Yes."

Marion shook her head. "I'm afraid there is no doctor with power to cure Marjorie's ailment," said she.

They were sitting in James's smoke-room, after Marjorie had gone to bed.

"Then there's nothing for it but to take the bull by the horns," said James. "Things can't go on as they are. She is wasting away before our eyes."

"Do you mean she ought to divorce him?" said Marion.

"Yes," said James, "and forget him."

Marion bent forward and looked into the fire, resting her chin on her hands. "She may divorce him," she said, presently, "though I doubt it; but she will never forget him."

"It will help her to do it, at all events," said James. "Once do away with the formal tie and get her out of her present false position, and she will be able to face the world again on equal terms.

Put a clean sheet of paper in front of her, and in time she may feel inclined to write upon it."

"You may be right, dear," said Marion; "but isn't that rather like cutting a tangle which it is too much trouble to unravel? I can't help thinking that when two people are genuinely attached to one another—as Marjorie is, in this case, and probably Norman, too, at the bottom of his heart—there ought to be some other way."

"There ought to be, I daresay," said James, drily, "but there isn't."

"Supposing Marjorie went to see him herself?"

"It would be painful to both of them," said James, after pondering the point; "and I don't see what good would be likely to come of it."

"Norman's pride may stand in his way," said Marion. "However much he desired it, he couldn't return to Marjorie now, unless she asked him. They have been separated nearly a month by this time. And a month can work wonders occasionally," she added, smiling. "Remember how horribly tired of me you always are when you go up to Yorkshire for the shooting in August, but I've become quite a nice person by the beginning of September."

"Almost livable with," said James, laughing.

"An annual tonic of healthy separation," said Marion, "is as essential to the happiness of most married people as the month in Switzerland or at Brighton is to their health."

"Possibly true, my dear," said James; "but I hardly fancy the remedy would be drastic enough in the present case."

"At any rate, it's one they were not in the habit of trying," said Marion.

"And the situation is complicated," James added, "by what Norman called 'other circumstances.' "

"Yes, of course; Marjorie knows that; it is not a bar."

"So she believes," said James. "Marjorie is tingling to her finger-tips with personal delicacy; but I'm half-inclined to think that, upon a point of abstract morals, Norman's is the sounder judgment of the two."

"It is the man's judgment," said Marion, "which comes from reason; Marjorie's is the woman's, which comes from the heart."

"We must talk it over with her plainly in the morning," said James, finally. "This state of drift must be put an end to somehow. It's not good for

her, and it's not good for him; and," he added honestly, partly to himself, "it's not good for us."

When James arrived downstairs on the following morning the two ladies were already seated at breakfast. He wished them a cheery good-morning and took his place. Three or four letters stood by his plate, which he proceeded leisurely to open and read. He was not guilty of intentional rudeness; probably he would have found some difficulty in realising that his action could be so characterised, had it been pointed out to him. This is one of the minor discourtesies of life, not requiring, one would suppose, pre-eminently keen perceptions to appreciate, yet failing of appreciation by a very large number of men and women who would indignantly resent any suspicion of their breeding.

Having completed the perusal of the letters and made some comments upon their contents to Marion—comments which could not interest nor even be understood by Marjorie—he placed them back in their envelopes and laid them in a little pile at his side. Then he turned to his sister-in-law with a kindly, but graver expression than was habitual with him.

"Marjorie, my dear," he said, quietly, "I think the time has come when this question of your relations to your husband will have to be faced."

Marjorie hardly knew what to expect. She looked up with an expression partly of alarm, partly of challenge. "I don't understand," she said.

"It is simply this, my dear," explained James, as gently as he could. "There are a couple of plain truths staring us in the face, which won't appear any different however long we look at them: he has deserted you, in the first place; and, in the second, it is of no use attempting to shut our eyes to the fact that he has evidently not remained faithful."

Marjorie turned red, and then white. "Need we talk of that, James?" she said, quickly. It was not that her pride was wounded by his assertion—she had accepted the fact long ago, and become used to it—but simply that her susceptibility rose in arms against reference to such a subject by a man.

James did not misunderstand her; and it gave him the first direct glimpse he had yet had of the nature of that which Norman had found unbearable.

"No," he answered, "we needn't, Marjorie; except to say that those two facts in conjunction give you a legal right to divorce."

"I will never divorce him," cried Marjorie, vehemently, almost in tears, "never!"

James put down his knife and fork, and cleared his throat. His present task was one which he relished as little as any that could have been given him.

"Now, my dear," he said, gravely, "I want you to try to look at this matter calmly and dispassionately. Don't suppose I can't understand how difficult that is for you to do; still, I ask you to do it, if you can. There is a principle involved which is quite apart from any personal sentiment and inclination whatever. In my opinion—I urge it upon you as a plain man who takes a plain view—it is your duty to take this step."

"I can't, James," cried Marjorie, almost wildly, "I can't. It's all I have of him now—all, all. Don't ask me to give up even that." The tears were in her eyes and her voice was choked. "He is my husband," she wailed—an infinite tenderness in the word—"my husband!"

There seemed a danger that she would go into hysterics. James resumed his breakfast to allow

her time to recover. After a few minutes she furtively wiped the tears from her eyes and returned to the occupation, which James's first words had interrupted, of breaking the toast on her plate into little pieces. She glanced at her sister with secret appeal in her eyes. But Marion knew that she was in no danger of being treated with undue harshness, and for the moment she wisely refrained from joining in the discussion.

"What is the alternative?" said James.

"I can wait," Marjorie said.

"You can drift, you can pine, you can wear yourself to skin and bone, perhaps into the grave. Is it fair to yourself? Is it fair to your children?"

"I shall not die," said Marjorie, quietly.

"Is it fair to Norman?"

"Oh!" there was actual physical pain in the interjection.

James had not the heart to press the point. In his view, moreover, it was not the argument which should carry most weight, though, doubtless, it would work the most potently with her.

"It is the principle that I want you to look at, Marjorie," said he. "What is to come of this waiting?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Marjorie, wearily. "He may want me some time. Why are you so hard on me, James? If you take hope from me, what have I to live for?"

"If I seem hard," said James, "it is only that I wish your good and nothing else. I won't press you one inch beyond where your own sense is willing to take you, when you realise the facts. You want to go on waiting, in the hope that, some time or other, he may think better of it and come back to you?"

"Yes," said Marjorie.

"Well, then, my dear, I ask you to look at it in this way: Is it right? Is it moral?"

James's own sturdy, British opinion upon the subject was evident; but Marjorie only opened her eyes a little wider and looked at him. She plainly failed to reach his gist.

"Is he to be allowed," continued James, "to sow wild oats at this period of his life to any extent he chooses, and then to come back to you and say, 'Marjorie, I've had enough of it; I want you to take me back again'?"

Marjorie lost James's ethical point in the leaping hope of the proposition it contained. Her eyes

brightened, a soft colour flushed her cheeks, the whole of her poor, wan face became pathetically illumined. "Oh, James, do you think he will?" The words dropped, on the gentle cadence of her winning voice, with irresistible sweetness and appeal.

James grunted. "There's not much doubt about the answer you would give him, if he did," he said.

"Don't urge her any more, James," said Marion, breaking in quietly, at last. "She can't do it yet. After all, he didn't appear to you to be leading a wild life, did he?"

"No, he didn't," James was obliged to admit. "He was barely comfortable, for that matter. When I got there the windows were all open and the room was full of smoke. Norman isn't a man who lets much be seen on the surface, but there's a pretty strong under-current, unless I'm very much mistaken."

"Let us hope you are," said Marion. It appeared to her to be an opinion that need not have been volunteered. She refilled her husband's coffee-cup, which had recently arrived in her neighbourhood. "Marjorie, dear, would you like to go and see him?"

A crimson flush of startled joy flooded Marjorie's face, and the tears again started to her eyes. Apparently it was a possibility which had not even occurred to her hitherto. She could not speak.

Marion gave her time. "Well, dear?" she said, presently.

"I think it would annoy him," said Marjorie, pathetically.

That was more than James could stand.

"Norman's feelings in the matter are entirely beside the point, my dear," he said. "The whole question is whether such an interview wouldn't be unlikely to unsettle you and leave the future more difficult to face than ever?—supposing nothing came of it," he almost forgot to add.

"Oh, I would risk that—I would bear that," said Marjorie.

"But that is just what we don't want, dear," said Marion. "It grieves us to see you suffering."

"Besides that," said James, "it is not a politic frame of mind to get into, if you are to go and see Norman. You would have to show him that he has made a mistake." He smiled at her kindly. "Just at present I'm afraid the plant for that pur-

pose has got a trifle out of order. You've run yourself down with worry and grown peaky and thin."

"Marjorie *can* look nice," said Marion.

"Yes; the trouble is," said James, "that she refuses to look her best."

"I *will* look my best," put in Marjorie, almost breathlessly; "I'll put on my cream cloth."

This was a gown which Marjorie had originally bought for a wedding, which had suited her indubitably, but which she had never been known to wear since.

"Yes, and the beaver hat that goes with it," supplemented Marion, "trimmed with ostrich plumes. She will be well dressed, James," she added, calmly.

"If you say so, my dear," remarked James, "I haven't a doubt about it."

Marion looked at her sister. "It would make you happier to go, dear?" she asked.

Marjorie raised her eyes and returned the look without speaking; then, half-timidly, stretched out her hand.

"Take her, James," said Marion, holding the hand.

"Eat well and drink well, for the next week,"

said James, "and if the roses have come back by that time, we'll think about it. . . . Pass the Cavendish marmalade, if Marion has left any."

CHAPTER XVI

JAMES was one of that numerous and excellent class which "has" its Saturday afternoons; whose members cease to be commercial machines and become human beings, with social duties to perform, human passions to recognise, personal needs and wants to supply, for one half-day in the week. Ever since he was a boy James had been accustomed to a half-holiday on Saturday. He had now reached a position where a half-holiday—or a holiday of any kind—was a matter entirely within his own control; but it suited him generally to remain faithful to Saturday; and so a Saturday it was that he nominated for Marjorie's visit to her husband. On this occasion, however, he extended the prescriptive limits of his weekly leisure by adding the morning. He had no intention to make a third at the interview; all he set himself was to bring his charge to the place of meeting in as sound a condition, men-

tally and physically, to fight her own battle, as he had it in him to do.

Marjorie, in the meantime, had faithfully done her best to obey his injunctions. But eating and drinking is pathetically little a matter of the will, and pathetically much a matter of temperament and external conditions. Still, the excitement engendered by the prospect of her visit had acted beneficially on her spirits and roused her from the lethargy into which she had seemed to be in danger of sinking. If the "roses" could not be said to have returned to her cheeks, at least there was an underglow in her general air which it had previously lacked, and when she came down on the morning of the fateful Saturday, arrayed in the cream cloth, James surveyed her appearance without dissatisfaction.

"But can't you manage something different about the hair?" he suggested, a little diffidently, at the conclusion of his scrutiny, "something like Marion has it?"

And, indeed, there was a very marked contrast between her soft stretch of fluffy brown hair, brushed plainly back, and the smooth coils that billowed in graceful abundance about Marion's head.

On this point, however, Marjorie was obdurate. "I've always worn it like this," she said, simply; "I can't change it now. Besides, I shall have my hat on."

This was the cream beaver with ostrich plumes. It was donned an hour or two later, and James had no longer any excuse for criticism. Marjorie, as she had promised to be, was at her best. The simple, retreating figure we have become accustomed to had disappeared, and one very different stood in its place. Without ostentation, she was quietly conscious of herself and of the dignity of her sex, delicately elegant, unassuming, yet perfectly assured. Beneath her calm exterior, however, she was sheltering considerable mental excitement, a fact which James recognised.

"Give me your hand," he said.

The right was already gloved, so she held out the left, and for a moment he clasped the long, thin fingers in his palm.

"Trembling," he pronounced. He dropped her hand. "The Carlton, I think," he said, "and Clicquot '92."

To the Carlton they went. And let it be said at once that, if we have conveyed the impression that

Marjorie would find herself in these circumstances anything in the nature of a fish out of water, we have completely misled our readers. It was never, with her, a question of what she *could* be, but of what she *would*. As she preceded James to their table, she was more at her ease even than he, who had trodden these same halls many a time and oft. She threaded her way quietly along, carrying herself at the full height of her tall figure, breeding and grace in every movement. Not Marion herself could have excelled her. More than two or three pairs of eyes were turned to follow her as she passed.

"Nice-looking woman the old boy has with him," said one carefully groomed young gentleman to an equally exquisite companion of the other sex. "Wonder what he's after?"

Why a man who is still in the neighbourhood of forty must necessarily become "old" because his figure shows a tendency to run away with him is a question which James, who had overheard the remark, would have liked to have had satisfactorily answered.

"Thought so," commented the immaculate

youth, out of the profundity of his wisdom, when the champagne was placed on James's table.

He was a trifle disappointed to find that Marjorie steadily declined to drink more than a single glass, in spite of James's pressure; though the action of the latter, in repeatedly urging it upon her, was one which the wisdom aforesaid found ridiculously easy to construe.

After lunch they sat for half an hour in the Palm Court, while James smoked a cigar, which he was careful to take from his own case, thereby saving 75 per cent., and possibly securing a better article. No more generous, open-handed creature than James breathed, but he was also a business man and he disliked waste. Had Marjorie been masculine and a smoker, she would have paid the additional 75 per cent. and then probably have thrown away three-quarters of the cigar.

James was not satisfied with her state. He could see that the arm which raised her coffee-cup was not quite steady. He would have been far better pleased had she been willing to draw the line at lunch a little less rigorously. Such a concession, as he touchingly pointed out to her at the time, would have been beneficial to both of them, since no one

knew better than himself that the extra glasses which her abstemiousness had compelled him to drink would not be left out of the account in the subsequent settlement with his digestion. To distract her thoughts, he encouraged her to talk about their neighbours and to make conjectures as to their probable relationships. It is a profitless but entertaining form of speculation, which who has not indulged in?

Near them were seated a couple—of opposite sex, need it be stated?—who appeared at the distance of a few yards to be very innocent and very amiable and very young. His cheek was as smooth as a schoolboy's, and her eyes were as round as a baby's. Yet, if you could have gone quite close to them, Marjorie, you would have noticed that the hair of each was tinged with grey; and if they had happened to look up, you would probably have come to the conclusion that both had a working acquaintance with the ways of the world they lived in. He had a book in his hand—evidently a new one—in which, at the moment when James and Marjorie first noticed them, he was writing in pencil. She was watching him earnestly—too earnestly for it to be quite real. He gave her the

book when he had finished writing, and for some minutes they looked intently at one another and talked of very momentous things, to judge from the expression of their countenances. Then suddenly she snatched the paper cover from the book and began to write in it in her turn.

"Now *she* is writing," said Marjorie. "How funny they are! I wonder what it's all about?"

"Playing 'consequences,' probably," said James, reclining pleasantly in his chair and emitting a thick cloud of smoke. "About their mark, I should say. They look as if they'd got out of the nursery by mistake. She isn't sure what 'she said to him' " (as the lady hesitated). "Come, Miss Grave Eyes, write 'You really mustn't' and have done with it."

James's supposition was very wide of the mark, however. The book is the *British Barbarians,* and he has just written her name in it. She is now hastily committing some of her own verses to the somewhat flimsy paper of the loose cover—she said she always jotted them down on odd scraps in that way. (A clean sheet of foolscap on an orderly desk is obviously anathema to the poetic temperament.) But the verses are certainly not without rhyme, nor, for the matter of that, without reason.

Perhaps, as she is so absorbed, she will not resent it if we glance over her shoulder and take down the first two stanzas:

"I know not whence he came:
I only know
That things are not the same;
Nor gloom, nor glow,
Nor summer's flowery meads,
Nor winter's snow.

"I know not why he came:
I only know
Life holds a loftier aim,
Above, below,
The whole world is become
Diviner so."

When she had completed her task she handed the cover to her companion. He read the verses, made a few polite comments, ventured diffidently to suggest the practical difficulties attending a "loftier aim below," was informed, equally politely, that the aimer and not the aim was "below," thought better of an impulse to inquire if the same reading applied to "above," then carefully folded the paper and slipped it in his pocket—where he found it a fortnight later, the next time he put on the coat.

"They seem to be getting on very well," said

Marjorie. "I wonder if they are married, or going to be?"

Yes, Marjorie, they are married, but not to one another; and if they were, they would quarrel in a fortnight, as they have already done with their present partners.

"Oh, dear, this is very ridiculous," said Marjorie, suddenly, "all this guessing. Do you suppose other people are doing the same thing about us?"

The small distraction, nevertheless, had done her good. She was more like herself than James had seen her for some time. To be herself, however, was not enough; she must be above herself, or below, if the task that lay before her was to be undertaken with any prospect of success. He determined to subject her mental attitude to rather a searching test.

"Very likely," he said. "I heard a man, as we came in, say he thought the old boy had got hold of a nice-looking woman."

Marjorie drew in her breath. For a moment the inclination to be shocked, to be horrified, gripped her. James saw it. Then, instead, "Oh!" she exclaimed—real indignation in her voice—"you are not at *all* old. I think you look very nice, James."

"Well done," said James. He pressed out his cigar in the ash-tray. "Now let us get a cab and go."

When they reached Albany Mansions, they were told that Villiers was out. The commissionnaire, on being asked if they could wait, showed them into a small apartment on the ground floor, barely furnished with three hard chairs and a square table—a room which he was accustomed to use himself in the intervals of his duties. This wait was unfortunate. Marjorie sat on one of the straight chairs, her hands in her muff, all her lately found spirit slowly oozing through her finger-tips. James tried hard at first to keep the conversation flowing upon the easy lines of the Palm Court. But the environment was no longer benevolent; no dramas were working out on every hand. Marjorie could only see the heavy drop-curtain which would shortly lift upon the second act of her own drama. She could not respond. Even the effort to talk at all was considerable. After a time James realised this. He gave up the attempt, picked up a slightly crumpled copy of the *Daily Mail* that was lying on the table, and instantly became imbued with the idea that the world was coming to an end.

They had been waiting nearly half an hour, when they heard a hansom draw up to the curb outside. Immediately afterwards several other slight sounds penetrated to the little room. There was a slight ripple of woman's laughter, and a silvery voice called out, "Don't forget the parcels, Norman." A skirt swept past the door, followed by a man's footsteps, and then, gradually, silence.

Marjorie sat perfectly motionless, though her heart was beating as if it would choke her.

After a lapse of a few seconds the door was opened, and a uniformed head and shoulders appeared in the aperture.

"Mr Villiers has gone upstairs, sir," said the commissionnaire.

James took Marjorie's hand. It felt chill and lifeless even through her glove. He gave it a friendly pressure.

"Now, run up, little Marjorie," he said: "Number eleven on the second floor. Keep your heart high. And good luck to you!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE last thing in the world that Marjorie desired was to catch her husband in the society of the companion with whom she had heard him go upstairs. She disliked scenes, she felt herself to be incapable of rising to a great situation, and—more potent cause than either—she was acutely anxious to avoid distressing Norman. So she crept up the steps, listening as she went. Passing the first-floor rooms, a sudden shout of laughter brought her to a dead halt, her heart thumping. The noise subsided, and she went on again. The ascent was not a long one, and she made it slowly, yet when she reached the second floor she was panting as from strong exertion. A sickly weakness came over her, and she was obliged to lean upon the banister for support. And she could not still her heart. Yet, even then, she did not regret having come. She had strung herself to the point of this interview—to make this

bid for her life's happiness—and she intended to carry it through, cost her what it might.

After a few moments she felt equal to go on. The latch of No. 11 was fixed—the door was even slightly ajar—so she pushed it open and went in. She found herself in a small lobby and almost in total darkness. For some seconds she could hear nothing but the beating of her own heart. Afterwards several slight sounds successively reached her ears—the creak of a chair, a rustle of papers, a low cough. Then she realised with a deep thankfulness, a deep joy, overwhelming every other feeling, that only a thin door now separated her from the man who, for the last five weeks, had scarcely been absent from her thoughts for a single moment, day or night.

Very gently she turned the handle of the door and went inside. Norman was seated at a table with his back to her. He was not writing, though his papers were spread out in front of him. He was leaning back in his chair with a small book in his hands, of which he was quickly, almost angrily, turning the leaves. Marjorie knew the book, and she knew the state of mind that called it into use. How often had she not seen him sitting in precisely

the same attitude, occupied in precisely the same way?—his vigorous brain, teeming with unwritten stores, held in temporary and galling bondage by a single elusive word.

He heard her step, and mistook it. "Rosamond," he said, still twirling the leaves of the synonym dictionary, "what is the word which suggests a tone of command, but gives some idea of injustice or harshness? Not 'arbitrary,' and not 'arrogant,' and not 'imperative' — something quicker, sharper; I've used it often."

"I think it's 'peremptory' you mean, Norman," said Marjorie, gently.

Norman started—then slowly rose from his seat and turned to face her. It was characteristic of him that, before speaking, he bent down and made a note of the word.

"I am sorry you have done this, Marjorie," he said.

He noticed the change in her appearance, and his first feeling was one of unreasoning gratification; to be followed almost immediately by acute regret, as he realised its purpose. For, in spite of all her fine feathers, he saw the Marjorie he had known—tender, retreating, pure-souled, loving, loyal, cap-

able of opening and expanding among things lovely and of good report, but ready to shrink into tearful seclusion before a single harsh word or rough phrase or untimely jest. And he saw, besides, the brave determination to hide unhideable nature, and to become such as she thought he would wish. Marjorie could be nothing but herself. She had been herself at the Carlton—in that environment she had dilated; she was herself now, but drooping, overstrained, beneath her resolute fight to be otherwise. The sight of her went to Norman's heart.

Something of this showed in his face. The look of distress that came into it was as fraught with disheartening meaning to poor Marjorie as a judge's severest frown to a prisoner in the dock. All James's careful measures, all her own heroic resolutions, had failed at the first moment they were put upon trial. And beneath the bitter disappointment that the knowledge carried with it her fortitude gave way. Tears started to her eyes, and the faint sickliness again oppressed her. She swayed slightly and laid a hand heavily upon a table near her.

"You are not well. You are ill," cried Norman, sudden anxiety in his voice. He crossed the space

between them, and supported her, very gently, to a low chair near a window. Then he opened the casement and let the cold breeze play upon her. "It is too much for you. You should not have come, dear."

The last word was not uttered mechanically, but quite earnestly. It dropped upon Marjorie's ears like a note of melody.

But she gave no sign that she had noticed it. "It is very stupid of me," she said. "I can't understand it. I shall be all right in a minute or two."

She closed her eyes, and Norman stood watching her. Presently a slight colour returned to her cheeks, and she lifted her lids again. But she did not immediately speak. Without appearing to observe him, she was conscious, on her side also, of a change in her husband since she had seen him last. His eyes were duller and his skin more opaque, and there was an indefinite suggestion of heaviness in his air which had not been there before. Quite naturally her eyes sought his, eyes which, without any design to work upon his feelings, but because she could not help it, were filled with all the pent-up wretchedness of the last five weeks.

"Norman," she said, simply, "I can't do without you. Why have you left me?"

Norman was half leaning, half sitting upon the table, staring into the fire. "We won't talk of that, Marjorie," he said, "it will only distress you."

"Oh, but you *must* let me talk of it," she cried, almost piteously. "That is why I have come."

Villiers looked at her eager, distressful face, and then looked away again. "I think you know quite well why I left you," he said.

"Yes," she replied. She bent her eyes to her muff, and a slight flush mounted to her cheeks. "I didn't understand."

"And that is the whole kernel of it," said he, still looking into the fire. "It is because you didn't understand, and never could understand, because you are too—what shall I call it?—too immaculate ever to understand, that we cannot unite."

Marjorie paused. The next thing was very hard to say. But she made a struggle and said it, hardly above her breath: "It would be different now."

"It would have been different at any time, had you known. I don't doubt that, Marjorie," said Norman.

She looked up with quick hope; but he stopped her before she could speak, suddenly turning his glance full upon hers.

"Oh, don't you realise," he cried, "don't you know me well enough to be sure that it could give me no gratification to martyr you? Or that I could do otherwise than loathe myself if I did?"

"But—but—I am your wife," she said.

"Oh, yes, I know that I am invested by Church and State with plenary powers to immolate you, and that you are a willing victim. If I had been a savage, we might have continued to live together. I don't say you would have been happy."

"What do you want me to say?" cried Marjorie, helplessly. "I will be all I can, dear."

"I know, I know. It is not a matter of your own volition. Things are what they are, and nothing can alter them. Apart from everything else, do you think it would be right for us to live together in such conditions?"

"Yes," said Marjorie, without hesitation; "we are married."

"But don't you see, can't you realise, that relations such as those are not only physically vapid, but morally wrong, unless entirely reciprocal?"

"I don't know," said Marjorie, rather piteously. "I only know I want you."

"You want me—and yet—" He pulled a chair from under the table and sat upon it. "What a curious, complex nature yours is, Marjorie! I wish I could understand it. Now, supposing—I am putting a hypothetical case—supposing I were to live next door, and came in to see you and talk to you, say, two or three times a week, would that do?"

"No," said Marjorie; "I should want to know you were *there*."

"But I *should* be there—next door—accessible at any time and willing to help you."

Marjorie shook her head. "It wouldn't be the same thing," she said. "I should want to feel I had you in the house, to rely upon and make me feel safe."

"Well, we will imagine another case," said Norman. "Say a great number of people lived together in a large house, you and I among others. We should meet every day in the ordinary course, at meals and so on; and I should always be available for advice, whenever you thought it worth asking for."

"No, no," cried Marjorie; "I want to have a *right* upon you that no one else has."

"To my support?" said Norman. "You have that."

"No, no, *no!*" Marjorie was almost impatient with him. "Something much more personal than that. Can't you understand?"

"I don't think you understand yourself, Marjorie," said Norman, quietly. "I can see you are conscious of a desire to stand in some peculiar relationship to me. What relationship, I don't think you know. Certainly not that usually involved by marriage. Do you mean what people call a 'kinship of souls'? But that doesn't require personal contact or even propinquity."

"Oh, how cold you are!" cried Marjorie. At last she found herself, and her words came quickly on a flood of emotion. "Besides all that, besides having you near me to protect and advise and be good to me, I should want you sometimes to talk to me as you used to talk, and—and—" Suddenly she slipped from her seat and knelt before him, spreading her arms upon him: "—and I should want you sometimes to—to—" she bent her head "—to kiss me, Norman."

He strained away from her as far as the chair would permit. "You don't know what you are doing," he cried, hoarsely. He was very deeply moved. "Get up! Get up!"

"I do," said Marjorie, passionately. "I *do* know, and I don't care." She snatched his hand and pressed it to her hot cheek, and the tears fell upon it and bedewed it. "You are mine—mine."

He lifted her very gently and placed her back in the chair, then turned and strode several times up and down the room—a habit of his when he was strongly stirred. After a time he came to a standstill near her, and looked down upon her with an expression in which distress and esteem were mingled with an emotion deeper than either.

"What can I say to you, Marjorie?" he said. "Beside you, I am only a brute beast, not worthy to bend down and kiss the hem of your dress. At this moment I am drawn to you almost irresistibly. Yet, even if—" he hesitated "—even if there were nothing else, and we were to resume our old life, I know that in a few months—a few weeks, perhaps—it would all have to be gone through again. We *cannot* change—we who are made as I am. Don't I know that? People sometimes wonder

what they would ask if they were to be granted a wish. If I could have one wish gratified, I should choose to be deprived of all—"

"I know what you mean," said Marjorie, hastily. "You needn't explain."

The words slipped from her lips without thought. The next moment she could have bitten her tongue out.

"Believe me," said Norman, quietly, "I was going to choose a phrase which should have trenched the very least upon your delicacy."

"Oh, what have I said? I didn't mean that." Marjorie's tears began to flow afresh. "Oh, why can't you be cruel to me?" she wailed piteously. "Why can't you beat me, anything, make me hate you? Then life might be bearable without you. But, all the time, you are so just and so gentle, and I know it and I love you for it." She bowed her face into her open palms, and he could see her slight shoulders moving silently.

It was more than he could bear. He dropped on one knee before her, quietly removed the two pathetically slender hands and pressed them between his own.

"Don't talk like that, dear," he said. "You live

so near heaven yourself that you can't realise what I am. If you knew how I have lived during these weeks since I left you, you would understand that I am a man not to be loved by one such as you, but to be despised and detested."

She freed one hand and frantically dashed the tears from her face. "That is *my* fault," she cried, hotly, "not yours. That is *my* sin, not yours."

"Hush, hush!" said Norman. "You couldn't sin if you tried."

"It isn't any good trying to make me believe that," she answered, still wiping the tears. "The whole of my life, since I married you, has been a sin—a sin of selfishness and thoughtlessness."

"No," said Norman, gravely, "you must not think that. We were oil and water put into a bottle together, and we didn't mix, and never could mix."

"I didn't try to mix."

"You did all you could," said Norman.

"Yes, I was ready to be martyred, with a bad grace. Oh, I know. And all those years you suffered, and didn't even scold me."

Norman rose to his feet with a light, good-humoured laugh. "Why, I might as well have

scolded the moon," he said, brightly, "because it didn't shine red."

He went over to the writing-table for a cigarette. When he returned to the mantelpiece to find a match, Marjorie had risen too. Her hands were clasped low down in front of her, and her face was turned up to his, an expression of the utmost stress in her eyes.

"I can't go on living without you," she said. "It would break my heart. I haven't been a good wife. Perhaps you are right—perhaps I can't be. Norman, I won't mind"—her voice suddenly dropped —"whom you know."

Norman stopped in the act of lighting his cigarette and turned his eyes upon her. "Marjorie!"

"Yes, I mean that," said Marjorie, quietly. "As long as you are justified."

Norman threw the match into the fire. The cigarette was not lighted, and he didn't light it. This was a possibility, it must be said to his credit, which had not even occurred to him hitherto. Now that it was brought to his mind, and by Marjorie herself, he could not fail to perceive its subtle allurement. It flashed across him that Rosamond might probably be induced to agree; indeed, it was

scarcely an expansion of the terms she herself had originally laid down for their intercourse. His present life, he was beginning to see more clearly every day, was good neither for himself nor his work. His mental stamina was gradually deteriorating under the perfumed influence of the too gracious daughter of Uranus and the sea. In the quiet, unexciting atmosphere surrounding Marjorie he knew he would become capable of better and more work, with advantage to his general welfare. If he had been an immoral man he would have accepted her offer. But, in spite of its fair promise, its innocuous suggestion, there was that at the back of him which fiercely rejected such a solution of his present difficulties. He could not have argued the point; he could only see it—feel it.

"No," he said, at last, firmly, "the position would be outrageous, unthinkable."

"Why?" said Marjorie. "I shouldn't know. I shouldn't ask. And you would be happy."

"Would *you?*" said Norman.

She hesitated. "Much more than I am now," she said.

"But can't you see," he said, "it would be immoral—grossly?"

The eyes that were looking at him widened just perceptibly.

"Oh, I know," he said; "you think I have a poor enough title to talk upon that subject. But, all the same, there is a difference, Marjorie. I can't explain it. I know it. A double life—especially one accepted and acknowledged—is a contravention of every code, written and unwritten. And at least, as the position is, you are not involved by it, your pure soul is free from taint."

Marjorie said nothing for a time. She bent her eyes upon the fire. Then she looked up. "I can't argue with you, Norman. You know I never could. But I think, perhaps, it might save you from worse."

"That is my look-out," said Norman. "You must not stain yourself to rescue me. You can feel," he added, gently, "that this *would* be to stain yourself?"

Once more Marjorie hesitated. "Yes," she said, slowly, in a low voice; and then again, after another pause, "yes."

"And yet," said Norman, "it is less repugnant to you than the ordinary relations of wifehood."

Marjorie turned her eyes upon him with such a

look as a wounded deer might give which has received a wanton lash from a whip.

"Forgive me," said Norman at once, humbly: "it was thoughtless."

"But not any more than these years of omission have stained me," Marjorie went on, quickly. "I owe some return for that. And I accept it willingly, for your sake and mine. To save you from what you said in your letter, from 'drifting utterly,' for your good, body and soul, and because I love you."

Norman made no movement. He had leant his elbows on the mantelpiece and pressed his hands to his head. To Marjorie, who had bowed herself to so extreme a point of wifely humility and generosity, it seemed hardly credible that he could decline the proffered gift.

Slowly she drew herself up and looked deeply at his averted face, with an expression of mingled pain and pride. "Norman, you can't *refuse?* You can't—"

She came to an abrupt silence. The outer door had opened and closed, there was a swish of skirts in the lobby, and she heard the same silvery laugh that had reached her ears below. Norman sprang

towards the door. He was too late. It opened, and Rosamond entered, in the freshest of gowns and happiest of moods.

She had a slim morocco-covered volume in her hand, and she was talking as she came in. "Here's the *Sigea,* Norman. She's terribly wicked, but vastly exciting. You must—" She stopped as she caught sight of Marjorie.

There was an interval of strained silence. Norman went up to her, took the book from her hand, and locked it in a cupboard. Then he turned around.

"Rosamond, this is my wife," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

INSTINCTIVELY Marjorie had drawn slightly away from Rosamond. Which was rather inconsistent of you, little Marjorie. You are ready to fall into the arms of the man; from the woman—your sister, the weaker vessel—you draw aside. You are fond of declaiming against what you call "man's law," which has an easier judgment for erring man than erring woman; it is you, the women, who make the law, and see that it is fulfilled.

Seeing Marjorie's movement, a natural instinct of protection took Norman to Rosamond's side.

"I can't talk to you now, Rosamond," he said, gently. "You are not in a hurry, are you?"

"Oh, dear, no," said Rosamond, lightly. "I'd no idea there was anyone with you. So sorry. You'll come across, won't you?"

She turned with a soft rustle, smiling brightly, and would have left the room, had not Marjorie unexpectedly intervened.

"Please don't go," she said. "I would rather you stayed. I want to talk to you."

She could hardly have said why she did it. It was an impulse. Something in the easy familiarity of Norman's tone and of Rosamond's response—its suggestion of *camaraderie*—impressed her suddenly with the conviction that unless she could enlist this woman's co-operation she would fail in her object.

Rosamond stopped quickly, in surprise. "To *me?*" she said.

"Marjorie, you understand?" said Norman, hastily, a note of anxiety in his voice.

"Yes," said Marjorie, quietly, "I understand. I know. That is why I want—you didn't properly introduce us," she added, with a nervous laugh.

"Don't let us have a scene," said Norman, "it can do no good."

She looked at him with rather surprised reproach. "Oh, Norman, did I ever make a scene?" Then, quickly turning to Rosamond, "Please, what can I call you?" she said.

Rosamond seemed to be slightly tickled. "I have sometimes wondered," she said. "My name is Rosamond Hope."

Marjorie looked puzzled. "I seem to have heard it before," said she. "I wonder where?" She paused and reflected. "I can't think," she said, finally.

"Perhaps Marion could tell you," said Norman.

"Marion?" Marjorie repeated the name slowly. "Oh, yes," she cried, suddenly, "I remember. You write," she said to Rosamond.

"I babble about dress," said Rosamond, smiling. "I don't think Norman would call it writing. The other day, in fact, he was decidedly scathing on the subject. Weren't you, Norman?"

"We discussed a few peculiarities of style," said Norman, with a laugh.

But the laugh was unnatural. The whole situation, indeed, was strained and difficult to keep up. Norman searched his brain desperately for some means of ending it. Then suddenly Marjorie broke through the ice.

"How lovely you are!" she said, gravely, looking at Rosamond. "I don't wonder Norman is fond of you."

Rosamond blushed with pleasure and embarrassment. A compliment from a woman is worth ten from a man—especially from a woman standing in

such a relation as Marjorie. No one knew that better than Rosamond.

"If I were an artist," continued Marjorie, almost enthusiastically, "I should want to paint you."

She sat down beside the table. A quick rush of spontaneity made Rosamond pull a chair from under it and do the same. She put her elbows on the cloth and looked intently at Marjorie across a corner.

"Mrs. Villiers, why don't you hate me?" she said.

"Why should I?" said Marjorie. "You are wiser than I am. Why should I hate you for that?"

"But we—we have made you unhappy."

"I have made myself unhappy," said Marjorie.

Rosamond said nothing for a moment or two. Possibly it had sometimes occurred to her that, by some such accident as had actually happened, she would eventually meet Norman's wife; possibly she had pictured in her mind what such an interview would be like. Never, never had her imagination painted such a scene as this. Never had she supposed that she would look into a pair of quiet eyes and become conscious of herself and her shortcomings as at no time before, would listen to a gentle

voice, whose unreproaching sadness would beat into her heart and move her to a deep gush of self-reproof.

"I wish I had known you before," she said, suddenly.

Marjorie widened her eyes in that almost child-like way of hers when anything puzzled her. "Why?" she said.

"Because it might have been different," said Rosamond. "Oh, what a muddling place this world is! Norman, what can we do?"

Norman was standing by the fireplace. "I don't think I quite understand what you mean," he said. "We can do nothing. We can't put back the hands of the clock. The die has been cast and we must abide by it, for good or ill."

And could any of the three honestly have said that it was for good? Marjorie's heart was breaking; Norman, deep in his inner self, was conscious that the life he was leading was inimical to all that was best in him; even Rosamond, now that she had met Marjorie, felt the stinging stab of remorse.

Yet, such is the frailty of human nature, that Norman, gripped by sudden after-thought, added hastily: "You couldn't part *now,* Rosamond?"

"I don't know," said Rosamond. "Oh, no, no!" she burst out. She looked almost beseechingly at Marjorie. "Mrs Villiers, I couldn't, I couldn't. Why have you come like this?" she went on, hurriedly. "If you had been vicious, scathing, I wouldn't have minded. I would have defied you. But you are kind—and you are unhappy. You make me feel as if such a wicked person as I must be, should never have been allowed to be born."

"You mustn't speak like that," said Norman, quickly. "The only blame is mine."

She threw him a quick glance of gratitude. "I knew you would say that," she said. "But I've lost any illusion I may have had upon that point; it's not yours, it's mine."

"It is mine," said Marjorie, quietly. Rosamond's evident sincerity appealed to her strongly, as anything true always did, however she might personally be affected. "I don't deceive myself, Miss Hope, any more than you say you do not. I was saying something to Norman when you came in which I don't want to unsay now that I've met you. Perhaps," she added, giving Rosamond a glance of generous acknowledgment, "if I hadn't said it before, I should now. Will you try to

understand me with very little explanation? I don't want to part you altogether."

Rosamond looked at her a long time without speaking. "What do you mean by 'altogether'?" she said at last, in low, rather tense tones.

Marjorie lifted her eyes with such a pathetic appeal for understanding that Rosamond would not press her.

"I think—I *think* I understand," she said.

Again Marjorie said nothing.

"Have you thought what that would mean?" asked Rosamond, very earnestly.

"Yes," replied Marjorie, quite firmly, but in a low voice, "and for Norman's sake and mine—even—even for yours—I will agree."

At the first blush it strikes the mind as somewhat of a curious discrepancy that the essential repugnance of this proposal, so fair and reasonable on the surface, should at once have been discernible by both Norman and Rosamond, and yet not by Marjorie. Her very innocence, indeed, concealed it from her.

Rosamond still kept her eyes fixed gravely upon her. "Do you think such a position would be bear-

able for either of us?" she said, "particularly for you?"

"Why for me?" said Marjorie, rather sharply. This repeated suggestion of an inability to appreciate her own purpose as it affected herself, coming first from Norman and then from Rosamond, was humiliating and irritating. A call for self-assertion took sudden hold upon her. "Why should I mind?" she went on, quickly, almost in the tone of a fretful child. "What should I lose? I always thought it was the worst part of being married."

Rosamond gasped. "*Part* of being married!" she said.

Marjorie saw Norman smile involuntarily. He was not smiling at her, but at Rosamond's astonishment. His wife's peculiar outlook had so long been a commonplace to him that her quaint expressions had lost their piquancy. If we should be less courteous and feel inclined to laugh at our little Marjorie, it might not be amiss to consider how far she was singular, to reflect to what extent Norman's "cumulated refinement" has tended to obscure the real nature of marriage. How many women not only go to the altar, but continue in a greater or less degree to the end of their days, under

the impression that the essential is a religious or quasi-religious ceremony, accompanied by such display of merriment and jubilation as means and inclination may dictate, and that everything else is incidental and subordinate, including the rather fluttering contingency of the resolution of private doubts upon a subject which has hitherto afforded some speculative interest! Among other "parts" may be cited, the having a house of your own, the furnishing of it, the being able to call yourself "Mrs" and wear a plain gold hoop, and the opportunity of spending more time than would otherwise be considered quite nice in the society of a man who is agreeable to you.

Rosamond recovered from her astonishment and suddenly laughed brightly. "And I suppose the next worst would be the remembrance of the wedding-cake?" said she.

It was spoken with the utmost frankness. But there is nothing much more unpleasant than to feel you are being made fun of, however good-humouredly. Marjorie had that mortifying consciousness which comes from the conviction that you have been tacitly relegated to an inferior plane in the conversation. It aroused all the latent fighting quali-

ties she had in her. Searching her brain for a means of defence, a thought suddenly flashed across it. She rose from her seat quietly, but with that unaggressive dignity which no one knew better how to command, and took a step towards Norman.

"What is that book you locked away?" she demanded.

"Nothing you would understand, Marjorie," he said, gently.

The light dismissal of her request only made her the more determined. Furthermore, it clothed the book in her overwrought mind with disproportionate importance, outside her original intention in seeking it. It became the "open sesame" to her happiness. She felt that if she could prove she was as little afraid of it as her rival, she could get her husband back.

"I want to see it," she said, still calmly.

"It's out of the question," replied Norman, in the same tone as before.

There was a suggestion of patronage, of superiority in his voice—unintentional, no doubt—which exasperated Marjorie beyond endurance. The ignominy of being refused what was freely permitted

to another—she the wife, the life partner, the bone of his bone—spoke to her, urged her, stirred her to the depths.

"I don't care," she cried. "If Miss Hope can see it, I can. I am your wife, Norman. I will. I insist."

Norman still neglected to take her quite seriously. "No, Marjorie," he said. "You haven't a notion what you are asking. Why, that book would make each particular one of your hairs to stand on end."

Oh, Norman, could you find no other tone in which to save this tender wife of yours?

The half-chaffing smile was still on his lips, when suddenly—a swish of skirts—Marjorie had rushed past him to the cupboard.

"Stop her!" cried Rosamond, frantically, who was at the other side of the room.

Norman sprang to the cupboard. He was not quick enough. The key was in the lock. Marjorie had turned it and the book was in her hand. More than that, without an instant's pause—in a flash—she had darted to the window and flung open the casement. Her eyes were blazing.

"If either of you come near me," she cried, standing there, "I will throw myself out."

She would have done. She was outside herself. Her ostrich plumes waving in the keen air, she was more like a picturesque fury than the quiet Marjorie we have known. Neither Norman nor Rosamond dared move. They stood watching her, helpless, as they might have watched a child with a loaded firearm. Marjorie raised the book.

"Mrs Villiers, for heaven's sake, don't," said Rosamond, her clear voice charged with a very pain of earnestness.

"I never asked anything in my life so fervently as I now implore you to put down that book," said Norman. He was serious enough now. The muscles in his face were straining, it needed the utmost effort of his will to keep himself stationary.

Marjorie took not the least notice of either of them. Indeed, the insinuation contained in the appeals only fanned her purpose.

She gave a short hysterical laugh. "I'm such a namby-pamby piece of crockery, am I," she said, "that a few sheets of paper and ink must shiver me to pieces?" She laughed again. "Come, little book, come and shiver me." She opened it at the

title-page. "*'The Dialogues of Luisa Sigea'*," she read. "How very exciting! Is my hair all right, Norman? 'The Skirmish—Tribadicon,'—what does that mean? 'Fabric—The Duel—Frolics and Sports.' What a boring book!"

She spoke nearly naturally, but not quite. The nervous tension beneath was just perceptible. Then, with an air of indifference—scarcely exaggerated—she turned haphazard to a page in the middle of the volume and began reading down it. The silence was oppressive. Norman and Rosamond hardly breathed. It was not for long. Slowly at first, then more quickly, then with a great rush, the whole of her face and neck and ears flooded crimson. It faded almost in a moment and left her deathly white. She uttered a low moan, like a child in pain. Then, without ostentation, as was everything connected with her, her knees gave way beneath her and she sank quietly to the ground, unconscious.

Norman lifted her gently in his arms and laid her on a couch. Rosamond fetched some eau-de-cologne and bathed her brow and lips with it.

After a few minutes she slowly opened her eyes. "What has happened?" she said, vaguely. She

closed her eyes again, with a tired sigh. "Yes—I—I remember."

She remembered: and she understood. With unclouded mental vision she saw at last—in all its black vacuity—the unbridgable abyss that divided her from her husband. And she sank beneath the realisation. The big hopes and longings she had brought with her, the life's happiness she had come to fight for, all were beaten down beneath an overpowering desire for rest.

"James is downstairs," she said, wearily. "He will—take me home."

CHAPTER XIX

BETWEEN four and five months later, on a bright afternoon towards the end of April, Norman Villiers was making his way slowly down Piccadilly. He stopped listlessly now and then to look in a shop window; then, finding himself engrossed in careful scrutiny of a stand of diamond rings or the embossed back of a silver hair-brush, he gave himself an impatient shrug and went on again. More than once a man hurrying eastward nearly collided with him, and apologised. On each occasion Villiers looked back at the strenuous pedestrian with considerable resentment, though the fault was his own. To have it suggested, if it be only by a brushing shoulder, that you are not part of the vigorous stream of life, but only a straw upon its surface, is not pleasant. He was wearing a dark flannel suit and straw hat—neither of them conspicuously tidy. He did not harmonise—and

he was conscious of the fact and resented it—with the signs of spring, the freshness and new life and hope about him.

And yet there was every reason, on the surface, why his mental attitude should have been entirely the reverse, why, indeed, he should have been among the brightest and most chirrupy of the products of spring. This was one of those red-letter days which usually bring satisfaction to the most hardened of literary men, and which in his own case had always done so in former times; when, after months of work, his manuscript, freshly typed, neatly packed, spick-and-span, had been finally delivered into the hands of his publishers. He had been accustomed to use an agent as intermediary for this purpose. To-day, however, he had taken the manuscript himself, partly because he had come to the conclusion that the agent did little which he couldn't do himself; and partly because he had learnt through experience to respect Thornton, as an honourable, straightforward man of business, who was not waiting to trip and snare him at every turn. He knew that an author who was compelled to deal with publishers who required watching like a sharper on a racecourse had much

better lay down his pen and take to other means of livelihood.

On the present occasion, however, there were several reasons to operate against the undivided sway of genial content in his mind. To begin with, he was not satisfied with his work—at all events, with the latter part of it. Frequently it had been done against the grain, by the mere force of his will, when he was painfully aware that he was not in a condition to produce; often in the teeth of the depressing conviction that he was not gripping, that he was writing what would be yawned over and found boring. He had known what it was to look back at his sheets and to feel the sickening droop which comes from the thought, "This is all the uttermost commonplace, and why anyone should take the trouble to read it I haven't the faintest idea." At those times, it was only the knowledge of what he had in him, of what had been hall-marked as containing at least a substantial proportion of gold, which kept him going.

In addition to that, circumstances had rendered it necessary for him to make Thornton a distasteful and, to him, rather humiliating request.

"I should be glad if you could arrange to go

through it as soon as possible," he had said, when handing over the manuscript; "and, if you are satisfied, perhaps you wouldn't object to let me have a small cheque on account."

Thornton had raised his eyebrows in evident surprise. "Certainly, my dear fellow," he had replied. "It's a trifle unusual, but we should be willing to do it in your case. There's nothing wrong, I hope? You got your draft for two hundred in February?"

Villiers had replied in the affirmative. He had not added that the two hundred, with an additional fifty, had been placed to his wife's credit on the 25th of April, and that in the meantime he shared the common need of humanity to sustain life by food and shelter. That phrase, it may be remarked parenthetically, covered practically the whole of his personal expenses. Rosamond, from first to last, had not accepted a single present from him, and continued steadfastly to decline to do so. She did not doubt his motives in offering them. Simply she would not place herself in a position which could be open even to the chance of misconstruction. All that was patent to Thornton, however, was that his client, in some way or other, had managed to get through two hundred pounds in a

couple of months. That, combined with his knowledge of the latter's usually temperate habits, had caused him considerable perplexity, and also some quite genuine anxiety on the novelist's personal account. And as the publisher was not a man whose face was the least inscrutable, these private sentiments had been perfectly discernible by Villiers.

Lastly, as affecting his present state of mind, Norman's health at this time was by no means good. The strain of serving two masters—his work and his passion—during the last six months had not been a light one, and had not been imposed upon his constitution without leaving its mark. He could not have said precisely what ailed him, nor perhaps would have admitted definite indisposition at all. Yet there were a few symptoms, some writing on the wall, which, if he could not interpret, at least he was obliged privately to recognise. Normally a person of equable temper, of late the least trifle had been apt to cause him senseless nervous irritation; his appetite, to his disgust, had become spasmodic and peculiar; he found, too, that any sudden exertion left him breathing hard and set his heart beating up into his mouth; and his brain, usually so vigorous, occasionally alarmed

him by running into a dead blank and refusing to answer to his call. On the whole, therefore, it was not perhaps to be wondered at that he was less elated by the completion of his manuscript than might have been expected, nor that he walked down Piccadilly with the indifferent air of a man to whom the world presents no interest and no allurement.

He was so proceeding when he suddenly caught sight of Marion. Clad in a fresh spring gown of soft heliotrope, she was crossing the pavement to get into her brougham. Norman instinctively made a movement to conceal himself in the stream of pedestrians until she should have driven away. In this he was not successful. Marion had already noticed him and was waiting at the door of her carriage until he came up.

"Why did you try to avoid me?" were her first words, uttered quite severely, as he approached.

When he removed his hat, Norman remembered that his hair had not been cut for two months and was straggling loosely from the central parting.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I have no excuse, except that I felt untidy."

She examined him perfectly frankly. "You

should not be untidy, Norman, in Piccadilly, in April."

The crisp air had given each of her cheeks a soft flush. Norman thought he had never seen her look more deliciously feminine and winning. He buttoned up his coat, which did not hang well, from the bottom, and furtively attempted to brush some mud from his left trouser-leg, the souvenir of a passing hansom. Also he held himself upright, which he was annoyed to realise sharply he had not been doing hitherto.

"Where are you going?" she demanded next.

He was about to say "Home," then changed his mind, and was framing a vague generality, when he abruptly scouted the unnecessary subterfuge, and replied plainly, "I am going back to Albany Mansions."

"Will you let me come with you a little way?" said Marion. "It is a long time since we met, and I want to talk to you."

Without waiting for a reply, she gave directions to her coachman to meet her at Hyde Park Corner, and turned westward by his side.

"I want to talk to you about Marjorie," she amplified.

"Is she still with you?" Norman asked.

"Well, just at present we have sent her away to Folkestone," said Marion. "James insisted upon her seeing Dr Percival, and he prescribed change of air. Do doctors ever prescribe anything else?" she asked lightly.

"Is she ill?" said Norman, with a twinge.

"James says so. Dr Percival doesn't know."

"What do *you* say?" looking into her face.

"I don't think she is ill at present," said Marion. "I think she may be, unless we can give her an interest in life."

It was difficult to pursue the thread. Norman took up another. "Wouldn't it be more convenient," he said, "if she were to take a small house of her own, or at least a flat?"

"Oh, we are very comfortable," said Marion. "The house is large enough. And James gets on wonderfully well with the children."

There was no underlying rebuke in her tone. Nevertheless, Norman found the information very far from palatable. That someone else was boarding and lodging his children, would perhaps, later on, see to their education, and in the meantime was "getting on wonderfully well" with them, was a

particularly nauseous pill he had not thought to be called upon to swallow.

But he took a big gulp and swallowed it. "It is very good of James," he said.

"Besides," added Marion, "it is better not to think of any permanent arrangement until matters are settled."

"Do you mean—?" He stopped.

"Yes," said Marion; "she is going to take divorce proceedings."

Norman received the information quite quietly. "I think that is best," he said, "for us both."

"So James thinks," said Marion. "I think, perhaps, at the bottom of her mind—not of her heart—she does so herself. She thinks you will marry Miss Hope?"

"If Miss Hope will marry *me,*" said Norman.

She looked at him with calm gravity. "Surely?" she said.

"I'm not so sure," said he.

The point was not of immediate concern. For the present, he had noticed that Marion had again pointedly left herself out of the reckoning. And he was beginning to realise, as he had often done before, that it was her opinion which counted most

with him. So again he pressed her: "But what do *you* think, Marion?"

"I can't be sure," she said. "It is you yourself who make the difficulty. If I could see inside you I could be sure. Otherwise I can't be."

He offered no comment, and she laid her hand on his arm. "Norman," she said, kindly, "I don't think you are happy—I'm sure you are not well."

Again he was silent.

"It is not too late still," she said, earnestly.

This time she deliberately waited for his reply.

"A second mistake," he said, at last, slowly, "had I made one, would not neutralise the first."

"If you can say to me honestly," said she, "that you are happy and content, and can look forward to the future without misgiving, I should agree with James that divorce is best for Marjorie as well as for you."

"That is rather a lot to say," said Norman. "But of this I am absolutely certain—I am less fitted now, even than before, to make Marjorie happy, or to be made happy by her."

"Very well," said Marion, seeing the futility of further discussion, "I won't argue with you. But I am sorry, Norman, for my own sake as well as

for others. I have always been proud of you as a brother-in-law; and I like you." She stood still as they reached the park gates. "More than that," she added, "if it is the least comfort to you to know it, I haven't blamed you."

The brougham was waiting and she got into it, and Norman closed the door. She put a small gloved hand through the window. Norman had not expected it. He took it in his own, bareheaded. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he bent his head and pressed it to his lips. The next moment he was striding along towards Knightsbridge, feeling slightly ashamed of his action.

He had not expected it. That fact forced itself steadily, ominously, further and further into recognition as he walked home. Why had he not expected it? Reason offered no adequate explanation, especially when Marion's concluding words were considered. Why, then? Why? Why? Why? Every beat of his feet on the pavement rapped out the monosyllable. He would not answer. He shook himself angrily and walked faster, declining to vouchsafe a reply to the pertinacious little questioner who had perched in the corner of his brain. Perhaps we, having no personal interest

in the matter, and being graciously filled with that sweet wisdom which springs from conscious rectitude, may be forgiven a suspicion that the process begun on the day when he had assisted Rosamond to erect a monument to the "little pages" had since made somewhat rapid strides.

When he reached Albany Mansions he ascended the four flights of stairs to his rooms with a heavy tread, and at once dropped into an easy-chair. He was not surprised that he was tired; he had become accustomed to be so after less exercise than he had taken that day. It was among the minor characters in that writing on the wall, which had already lost its novelty, and was beginning, through familiarity, to lose its admonition. He dozed lightly for half an hour, then got up, feeling somewhat revived, tidied his hair before a small ornamental mirror, and crossed the landing to Rosamond's room.

He found her seated before the fire, reading a novel. He sometimes wondered when she did her "stuff." He hardly remembered having caught her in the act. Yet that she managed to fill five or six substantial columns of close type weekly he had the best of reason for knowing.

"When do you get through your work, Rosamond?" he asked, in a half-chaffing tone.

"When I feel inclined," said Rosamond. She laid the book on her lap.

"Which evidently isn't just at present," said Norman, smiling, and at the same time appropriating a comfortable chair in reasonable proximity to hers.

"No, I'm lazy this afternoon," said Rosamond. She looked at him a little anxiously. "You look tired, dear. What have you been doing?"

"I went to see Thornton," said Norman, "and I walked back. It oughtn't to tire me. I don't think I've been very fit lately. Rosamond," he added, quietly, "I have some news."

"Yes?" said Rosamond.

"Marjorie is going to divorce me."

Rosamond's face gave no indication how the information affected her. For several minutes she gazed into the fire without speaking. At last she looked up. "Are you glad?" she said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We can marry."

Rosamond shook her head. "That is all you

think about," she said, with a short laugh; "jumping out of one pan into another."

"Aren't *you* glad?" said Norman.

"I think it is noble of her," replied Rosamond.

"Of Marjorie?"

"You stupid man, do you think she *wants* to divorce you? Do you think she loves you one atom less now than she ever did? Don't you understand that she is doing this because she thinks that to marry me would mean your happiness? that she is deliberately taking her heart and burying it for your sake?"

Norman took up a paper-knife from a table beside him and bent it in his hands. His face had become inscrutable.

"Why do you say all this?" he asked, at length. "Do you want me to go back to her?"

"No!" said Rosamond. "How can I? But I think no gentler, more unselfish woman lives."

"I have said that to you often," said Norman.

"Yes; well, now I agree with you."

There was a long pause.

Presently Norman said: "Rosamond, are you still determined not to marry?"

"Of course," said Rosamond. "We are happy

at present. Why should we change? Unless—Yes. Well, in that case, perhaps. One must acknowledge Mrs Grundy if you meet her in the street, though I've no intention to call upon her."

"It would be returning good for evil," said Norman, with a laugh.

"If the elderly lady occasionally practised that virtue herself," said Rosamond, "the argument would have more weight. I wonder if the misery that is endured to avoid giving her the least shadow of uneasiness ever *does* cause her a twinge of compunction?"

"You and I were born two thousand years too late," said Norman, smiling. "We don't understand the world of to-day, and assuredly the world of to-day doesn't understand us. We ought to have lived in the days of Augustus and the Latin poets.

'Adspicies occulos tremulo fulgore micentes;
Ut sol in liquida sæpe refulgat aqua,'"

he quoted. "What a beautiful couplet! And who knew its truth better than Ovid?"

"I daresay," said Rosamond; "but I must take your word for it, unless you will condescend to translate."

Norman laughed. "He advises his reader," he

said, "to 'watch her eyes, glowing with a tremuious light, just as the sunbeams are often reflected by a limpid pool.' "

"Very pretty," said Rosamond, "but rather meaningless without the context."

"I think you can guess the context," said Norman.

Rosamond said nothing; until presently: "And so Ovid knew it was true?"

"Oh, didn't he!"

A soft blush stole into her cheeks, and she looked into the fire. "Do *you* know, Norman?"

His eyes lighted. "Yes—yes—yes!" he cried.

Rosamond uttered a low laugh, happy and musical. She dropped her head on the back of her chair, smiling. "Then come and give me a kiss," she said.

CHAPTER XX

EVERY Sunday morning James Baker allowed himself what he called half an hour's indulgence. That is to say, he arose at half-past eight instead of at eight. Marion, having no inclination to follow his example, frequently availed herself of this half hour—especially since Marjorie's advent had limited their opportunities of private converse—to impart to her spouse's recumbent form, while she dressed, such things as it was good for him to hear, and, more commonly, to extract from him such other things as she deemed it desirable should be brought to her cognisance. She was moved to advance her outposts in the latter direction on the Sunday morning the next but one after her meeting with Norman. Marjorie, in the meantime, had returned to them. James himself had suggested it. The Folkestone visit had given her additional time for brooding, and the seaside air had benefited her as much as it ever benefits those whose

malady proceeds from sentiment and emotion. He knew, besides, that, now that divorce proceedings were to be set in motion, the lawyers would need her on the spot to assist them. It was perhaps not remarkable, therefore, that Marion should find it convenient to talk things over in the connubial secrecy afforded by the Sunday morning's indulgence.

She was engaged, when the spirit prompted her, in an operation involving a much be-frilled garment, which demanded that James should discreetly veil his eyes. He not only did that, but obligingly turned round to face the opposite direction, so obligingly that Marion was impelled to make a small grimace behind his back, from which, perhaps, we might infer that she would not necessarily have been finally inexorable had he proved to be in a recalcitrant humour.

"What did Mr Elliot say?" she asked.

Mr Elliot, it should be mentioned, was the elderly family lawyer, to whom James had paid a visit on the previous morning.

"Why, a great deal more than I cared to hear," said James. "It seems there will have to be two trials. And Marjorie will have to write a letter to

Norman, which can be read out in Court, asking him politely to return to her. I don't pretend to understand it. To have to ask to be given a thing one day, in order to be privileged to ask to have it taken away the next, seems a strange state of affairs to my mind. But that's what he says."

"It will take some time, I expect," said Marion.

"It wouldn't be lawyers' work if it didn't," grunted James.

"And it will be rather costly, I'm afraid. Luckily, Marjorie hasn't been spending much lately; but she will want all she has afterwards."

Shades of justice! Was ever such an insinuation? James was naturally incensed. His business integrity, not to say his sense of honour, was assailed.

"I suppose I can be permitted to pay my own lawyer?" he demanded, hotly.

It was a proposition which Marion could not allow to pass, however.

"I don't think you are called upon to do that, dear," she said, gently.

This was so flagrant that James was driven to hunch himself wrathfully round, forgetting the delicate operation that was proceeding. "I beg

your pardon, my dear," he said, quickly, and turned back again.

"Well?" said Marion.

James fixed a chest of drawers with a vicious stare. "I was going to say," he vouchsafed, "that what I am called upon to do is my own private concern, as a man of business, and I won't have any interference with it."

Marion shuffled into a petticoat. Then she went quietly around to the other side of the bed and knelt down beside it, resting her arms upon the mattress, thus interposing an effectual and very attractive screen between the chest of drawers and her husband's ireful gaze.

"Why will you persist in being so generous?" she said earnestly. "Don't you understand that it makes me uncomfortable to know you are doing all this for my sister? I feel as if it were a penalty you had incurred by marrying me. You have had her five months with us, and put up with the noise of the children, but I can't let you burden yourself with her law costs. It would be different if she couldn't afford it. In that case I would accept it humbly and be grateful—as I am, as it is," she concluded.

James was slightly appeased. His wife's gentle tones and sweet winning face were two arguments which he found it very difficult to resist.

"I'm not in the least generous—the word is preposterous," he grumbled. "I've employed Elliot for this business, and the man who calls the tune must pay the piper. If Marjorie isn't satisfied with him, she is at liberty to go somewhere else."

Marion flicked him lightly on the cheek with her hand. "Don't talk like that, you old humbug."

"The costs will be no great matter," proceeded James, still rather surlily: "Norman will have to pay most of them."

"How much?"

"A few pounds," said James, vaguely.

"A few hundreds?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said James.

Marion said no more. She put a soft arm round his neck and kissed him warmly, twice, upon the lips. Then she got up.

"What have you arranged with Mr Elliot?" she asked, after a time.

"I've promised to take Marjorie to see him tomorrow morning," said James.

"Oh!"—a trifle nervously.

"You think there will be a scene?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Perhaps it's not such a bad thing, after all," remarked James, "that this trial for restitution has to precede the other. It will get her used to the appearance of the Court and the general atmosphere. The atmosphere, by the by, unless it has very much improved since the last time I served on a jury, is the worst in Europe."

Marion threw aside the smooth towel with which she had been ruthlessly scrubbing her smoother neck, and suddenly uncoiled a big sheaf of hair and dropped it down on her back.

"I'm not quite satisfied that we are acting for the best, even yet," she said. "Norman is not happy."

"How do you know that?" said James.

"He almost admitted it. Besides, I could see it."

"Well, I don't know that we need consider him," said James. "He has chosen his own course."

"Yes, but if he is not happy, it may mean that he still cares for Marjorie, though he mayn't quite realise it, perhaps."

"If he does, she is still waiting for him, I believe," said James.

His callous tone may have deceived himself; it certainly didn't deceive Marion.

"And yet it almost seems it is the only thing to be done," she proceeded, without acknowledging his observation. "There is a perverseness in the way fate has dealt with these two good people which is quite heart-rending. Their lives have been spoilt by converging. If they had not met, they might each have been happy. Having met, it seems that nothing can make them happy."

James could find no reply to this which could conceal, even from himself, that he recognised its truth with considerable misgiving, so he was fain to keep silent.

"It's after half-past eight, dear," said Marion, presently.

Her recumbent spouse had been drowsily watching her while, with two shapely arms upraised, she arranged her plentiful dark brown hair.

"Do you know, Marion, my dear," he said, lazily, "it sometimes occurs to me that you are an uncommonly pretty woman?"

Marion blushed and laughed. Then she went

up to her lord and master and made a tug at the bed-clothes.

"Get up, lazy-bones," she said.

On the following morning, having been prepared for the visit to the lawyer, Marjorie came downstairs cold and pale, but for the present quite calm, even stately in her rigorous self-repression. She ate her breakfast—or pretended to eat it—in silence.

"My dear, we are not going to the dentist," said James, with the commendable design of lightening the situation. "Mr Elliot is the dullest old gentleman I ever met."

Marjorie made a heroic, but pathetically unsuccessful, effort to respond in the same spirit. James saw that it was beyond her power and left her in peace. After breakfast she went quietly upstairs to put on her hat, and as quietly returned. She was dressed very simply in dark grey and was wearing a veil. How different from the brave figure in cream and ostrich plumes who had gone out on her errand of hope four months ago!

She sat down, without speaking, in a chair before the small fire in the hearth, that was failing beneath

the warm May sunshine; and put her toes on the fender. When the maid opened the front door and whistled up a cab, James saw a slight shudder go through her and her clasped hands grip more tightly. A few moments later they heard that quick clatter and jingle which is the peculiar production of the London hansom, followed, as it drew up, by silence, broken by an intermittent and unimportunate jingle, as the horse occasionally shook its head.

James put on his gloves and took his polished silk hat from Marion, which the latter had been tenderly smoothing with a velvet pad. He went into the hall and held open the front door.

"Now, Marjorie, my dear," he said, lightly, "ladies first—except when you're hanging them."

But the hansom quietly waiting at the gate appeared suddenly to focus for Marjorie all the troubles that lay ahead of her, to stand as a concrete and definite pledge of the reality of that which she had undertaken to go through. She drew back, clinging helplessly to Marion.

"I can't! I can't!" she wailed.

James closed the door again.

"You must understand, Marjorie," he said,

quietly, "that there is no question of divorce as yet. You are merely going to ask the Court to order Norman to return to you."

"But I don't want to," cried Marjorie, between wild sobs. "They are happy together. I don't want to part them."

"Norman will know that. He'll understand perfectly well that it's only a legal device to enable you to set him free afterwards."

But Marjorie by this time scarcely heard him. In a frenzy of despair, she was calling piteously on her sister for protection, clutching impetuously at anything within her reach, as though James had a design to carry her off by main force.

"Hold her a moment, Marion," he said.

He went into the dining-room and came back with some brandy-and-water a trifle stiffer than he was accustomed to take it himself. Marjorie was beginning to laugh. He took her by the shoulders, handing the glass to Marion.

"Stop!" he said.

The unaccustomed severity of his voice frightened Marjorie into quietude. Then he commanded her in the same tone to drink the brandy. She obeyed meekly. It made her cough and choke, and

sent water to her eyes. But the good spirit did its work, and burned up into her cheeks; and when she got back her breath, the sudden shock of it forced her to utter a natural laugh.

"That's better," said James.

In a few moments she had recovered control of herself.

"I'm ready, James," she said, with pathetic humility. "I'm sorry."

She walked quite calmly to the cab and got in.

"There's no need to be sorry for that, my dear," said James, cheerily, as he took his seat beside her. "Some women indulge in hysterics for an hour at a stretch."

Privately, he asked himself, with a slight shiver, "If she is like this now, what on earth will happen in Court?"

But James didn't quite know Marjorie.

CHAPTER XXI

One afternoon about the time Marjorie was making her pilgrimage to the lawyer, Norman returned to his rooms to find a visitor waiting for him. This was Mr Thornton. He jumped up with evident relief as Norman entered.

"Ah, my dear fellow," he said, briskly, "I'm glad you've come. I was just going to write to you on a sheet of your own sermon-paper. They told me downstairs you were in, but when I got up here, not a sign of you."

"I was in one of the other suites," Norman replied, not without a just perceptible note of embarrassment.

"That explains it," said Mr Thornton.

It occurred to him, being a man whose head had been screwed on without any indecision, that possibly it might explain one or two other things, including the speedy disappearance of the two hun-

dred pounds. But upon that point, as we know, he was wrong.

"Sit down, won't you?" said Norman, a little listlessly. He had a suspicion what was coming. "Have you come about the book?"

He dropped into a chair himself, and rested his elbow on the arm and his cheek on his knuckles, looking across at his visitor with a lack of interest in his face, which was partly assumed and partly the result of the colourless view of life that had lately grown upon him.

"Yes," said Thornton, resuming his seat, "I want to talk it over with you, Villiers. It's better than trusting to letters, isn't it?" He picked up a parcel from the floor beside him. "Hayling had it to read, and his opinion was that it wasn't up to your level. So I've been through it myself—every word of it." He leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hands on the parcel. "I'm sorry, my dear fellow, but I'm bound to say I agree with him."

"I'm not surprised," said Norman, without showing any emotion, though the words hit him hard. "I wasn't satisfied myself."

"I'm thankful to hear you say that," said Thornton. "Don't suppose I'm condemning the book

wholesale. If it had been written by a new man, I should think a great many times before I lost him for all time by sending it back. You don't misunderstand me?"

"Not in the least," said Norman, a little gloomily. "All the same—whether I'm written out or not I can't say, but I fancy it's the best I can do to-day."

"Not a bit of it," said Thornton, cheerily. "We all have our ups and downs. Never a writer yet who didn't occasionally sink below himself, even in his published work." He began to untie the string of the parcel. "Besides, I'm not even complaining of the book as a whole. Up to a point I recognise you. It's only in the second half that it loses its grip." He took the manuscript from its wrapper and rapidly turned the pages, scanning the text with keen eyes. "Now, I should say that it's about here that you fall away." He laid his sturdy forefinger, within a few sentences, upon the point in the narrative which should have been followed by those "little pages" which the soft goddess had buried for ever in the limbo of forgotten things.

"Good lord!" said Norman.

"What's the matter?"—looking up sharply.

"A coincidence," replied Norman, "nothing more. What do you want me to do?"

"This is the position, my dear fellow," said Thornton, turning a friendly glance upon the novelist. "We are willing to bring this out in its present form, upon the old terms, if you press us. Your reputation will guarantee us against loss. We don't want to kill the goose, but at any rate it would leave us an egg to pay the funeral expenses. On the other hand, I strongly urge you—not as your publisher, but as your friend—not to press us." He tapped the manuscript with his finger. "Your name would sell this; but, afterwards, it wouldn't sell the next. Take my word for it."

"What is the alternative?" said Norman, quietly. "Do you want me to alter it?"

"There's nothing to alter," said Thornton. "The general plan is sound enough, and I don't quarrel with any particular passage. It's simply that this latter part is not living—it's not moving. You know what I mean?"

"Oh, yes," said Norman, hopelessly enough.

He knew, in addition, that it was the most damning indictment that could be brought against an imaginative writer. A technical fault, some

slackness of phrase, looseness of style, could be attacked with reasonable hope of remedy; but that indefinite, indefinable something which gives reality to creative work, which removes it from the domain of academic composition and breathes throbbing life into it, which comes unsought, unknown, and which, in spite of Carlyle's dictum, not any capacity for taking pains can acquire—if *that* had gone, what hope remained?

Thornton watched the novelist, as he sat staring gloomily in front of him, closely and with not a little concern. He noticed the change in him, and he found it difficult, in the face of that change, to say what he had come to say. The fact that his lot had been cast in lines where the performance of ungrateful tasks was almost part of his daily work, had not made them less so. He carefully divided the manuscript on his knee into two about equal halves. One he placed upon the table; the other he held out to Villiers. His vigorous face expressed deep earnestness, and even some emotion.

"Half measures are no good, Villiers," he said. "Burn it."

Norman turned pale. "Do you know what that means?" he said.

"Months of work," said Thornton. "Three, four, five. I'm not talking lightly, my dear fellow. I've watched your career since you first started this sort of work, and I take as much interest in it as any man living—perhaps a trifle more. It's my firm belief that, if you can keep true to yourself, you ought to go very far. I tell you honestly, I would rather bring out two ordinary failures than give that book to the world with your name on it."

Norman took the manuscript and turned the pages abstractedly. Suddenly he threw it into a corner. "I won't burn it," he said. "That's too big a dose to swallow all at once. But it shall lie there, and unless I die or go mad, I'll have another shot."

"Bravo!" cried Thornton, with genuine enthusiasm, springing up from his chair. "There's nothing takes you so far in this world as pluck."

"Except cheek," said Norman.

"No, no; cheek starts you, but pluck carries you through. You'll do it, my boy. Give yourself a fair chance; that's all you want." He waved his hand at the pile in the corner. "That wasn't written"—he was going to say "in happy conditions," and he would have liked to have done so,

would have liked, moreover, to throw out a friendly hint that a return to the environment in which his previous books had been produced might benefit his work; but Norman's face offered no encouragement to an incursion into his private affairs, so the publisher concluded the sentence—"when you felt in the vein for it."

"Perhaps not," said Norman, "but if you wait for the vein, you may wait for ever sometimes."

Thornton picked up his hat. "There's just one other thing before I go, Villiers," he said. "The last time I saw you, you hinted that money matters were a trifle out of gear. I'm sorry for that. Can we do anything for you? Would you like some reading?

In his brusque kind-heartedness, the publisher had put the matter a little less delicately than he might have done. Norman's pride was instantly up in arms.

"Many thanks," he said, almost coldly. "There is no necessity for that."

"Just as you like, my dear fellow," said Thornton, without abating a jot of his goodwill. "It struck me it might be a temporary help." He moved briskly to the door. "I got the MS. of a

novel this morning from a well-known barrister, writing anonymously. I should really like your opinion. Won't you let me send it to you? No? Very well. Good-bye, old fellow. Mix work and play judiciously. We must have the book ready for the autumn season, remember."

He had barely gone when Villiers realised his mistake; if, indeed, it can be said that he had not realised it throughout, and deliberately let his pride ride rough-shod over his prudence. When necessity makes its first insidious, unwelcome advances, we are most of us tempted to take the high horse; it is only when it has become a constant companion that we are able to humble ourselves and look it demurely in the face.

Norman saw, when it was too late, that he was no longer in a position to give himself airs upon the subject of his financial position. Thornton's verdict on his novel, and the consequent postponement of the revenues to be derived from it, would be a very serious handicap. During the next two or three weeks it was borne in upon him, with increasing conviction, that the time was probably not far distant when he would be compelled to eat humble pie offered with a far less considerate hand

than by his publisher. It added to his annoyance that the reading of MSS. was a task which of itself contained nothing derogatory, to which he had no aversion, and which he felt himself peculiarly fitted to undertake. Once or twice he was almost brought to the point of writing to Thornton, asking for permission to change his mind. But it is difficult to eat your words with dignity; and to do it otherwise he was not yet sufficiently reduced.

Matters were so far pressing, however, that for the moment the resumption of the novel was out of the question. He wrote two or three stories for popular magazines, which did his reputation no good. Moreover, the income derivable from this source was, to say the least, casual and intermittent. Also, the field was limited, as he began to discover. Nevertheless, with the idea of steadying his returns, he wrote to two editors, suggesting a series of stories upon a subject which he did not name, and of which, to be quite truthful, he had not, at the moment of writing, the faintest idea.

At the same time, he found it possible and prudent to make some reduction of his by no means extravagant domestic expenditure. For instance, since he was rarely dressed before ten, and his ap-

petite showed no signs of becoming less spasmodic, it was an obvious economy, as well as a convenience, to blend breakfast and lunch in a single meal. In no respect, for that matter, was there any indication of an improvement in his health: indeed, it grew steadily worse. There were days when the writing on the wall was expressed in letters so large as to alarm him. He had little faith in medical men; and the price of their advice was a matter which had now to be seriously taken into account. At last, however, after an attack of palpitation which left him almost prostrate, he consulted one, and was given a tonic and recommended a change of air.

During this time, it must be said to his credit, he was not once tempted to reduce his allowance to his wife. He regarded that, to all intents and purposes, as money which did not belong to him and over which he had no control. As for Marjorie herself, it would never occur to her to imagine him in want. She assumed a sufficiency of means, in herself and those about her, as a matter of course, like light and darkness and the procession of the seasons. Norman was well aware of this happy outlook of hers, and it was his knowledge of it and

his anxiety to save her, as far as lay in his power, the shock of disillusionment, which had weighed with him, almost more than anything else, to fix her allowance at the utmost limit of his disposable income.

He continued to see Rosamond daily—or ought we to say nightly? Indeed, as the days went on, he got into the habit of slipping across the landing that divided their suites with greater and greater frequency. For he found that her society was the only thing which relieved him for a time from the depressing companionship of his own thoughts. What though those thoughts returned with more stinging insistence after each visit? Was not the opiate constantly at hand to be re-administered? What though the effective dose became larger? Was there a hint as yet that the supply was exhaustible?

He had few other distractions in these days: an occasional visit to his club, a hand at bridge at fivepence a hundred, if he was needed to make up, a humble seat now and then at a good instrumental concert. His circle of friends was not a large one. He made them slowly, but stuck loyally to those he found sympathetic. Lately, however, he had

seen less even of these. It was not their fault, but his own. He did not analyse his reasons; indeed, it came upon him in the nature of a shock, one day, to awake to the fact that he was gradually allowing them to slide; much as it had done when he realised that he was not prepared for Marion to offer him her hand.

The ordinary froth of the social whirlpool he had never taken the least trouble to cultivate. To a man of original mind there is nothing more irritating than the society and conversation of people of the unimaginative, orthodox stamp, people who accept the views of their fathers upon every subject under the sun, who have been "taught to think," and who think accordingly. In his cynical moods, which, to do him justice, were not frequent, he used to say that one only met two types in casual social intercourse: those with bodies and no brains, and those with brains and no bodies; and that the second were the worst. Indubitably, if it is possible to conceive anything more boring than a talkative person without intellect, it is one whose intellect is unleavened by human nature.

While upon the subject of Norman's personal tastes and habits, we may conclude by admitting

that he was not what is called a "sportsman." That is to say, he took no pleasure in any form of recreation involving cruelty. I don't know if it has occurred to you, reader, but it has sometimes occurred to me, that this civilisation of ours is really rather a superficial business, a matter of "cumulated refinement," when so large a proportion of humanity is never quite happy unless it is killing something. It may be a fox to hunt, a bird to shoot, a salmon to play, a hare to course, but something there must be to kill, perhaps to torture and kill, to secure the earthly peace of great numbers of reasonably humane, large-hearted men; and of a few—let it be written small—women. Our perceptions will fine in time, no doubt; even to the point of recognising that a fox running into a farmhouse scullery to escape its pursuers is not necessarily a humorous incident, or an ideal subject for a comic Christmas illustration, and that that strained beast has not rushed for protection to the haunts of its natural enemies until it has endured the last agonies of mortal fear.

CHAPTER XXII

ALL days were much alike to Norman at this time. One morning, however, a little more than a fortnight after Thornton's visit, he found two letters waiting for him which were of sufficient importance to distinguish the day from its fellows. The first was from one of the magazine editors to whom he had written, politely thanking him for his offer to write a series of stories, but regretting that his arrangements for the year were already fully made. Villiers threw it aside—it reminded him of his first tentative efforts in journalism—and took up the second. It was from Mr Spindle, intimating that he wished to have some conversation with him, and expressing the hope that his client might find it convenient to call upon him at an early date.

All dates were convenient to Norman just now. The blow of Thornton's judgment on his novel,

coming on top of his previous depression of mind, and combining with his indifferent health, had driven him into a listless, aimless habit of life, from which he had almost given up the attempt to rouse himself. Accordingly, he picked up his hat and sallied forth there and then to visit the solicitor. It was noticeable that, as he walked through the streets, he kept a defensive eye on the alert against chance acquaintances; and once, on perceiving the approach of a man he knew slightly, he affected to be engrossed by the contents of a shop-window containing an interesting selection of children's undergarments.

He found Mr Spindle in what was for him quite a genial mood. His greeting was still cursory, but appreciably more human than usual. He invited Norman to be seated, and accommodated himself, as was his custom, with the edge of a chair, leaning one elbow on the arm and the other on his desk. It sometimes occurred to Norman to wonder if he took his meals sitting on the edge of a chair. Certainly it was impossible to conceive him disposed in one with any approach to comfort. He picked up from his desk a small sheaf of papers pinned together,

"Well, Mr Villiers," he said, "the other side has moved."

"The other side" was Marjorie. That Norman understood.

"I am quite prepared to hear that," said he.

"But possibly you don't appreciate the legal process that will be necessary," said Mr Spindle. "A suit for divorce on the petition of the wife is apt to be a tedious proceeding."

He continued to look contented. His face was one which was incapable of expressing any feeling upon a matter in his mind other than as it affected himself, even when he attempted it—which on the present occasion he did not. Brisk and business-like in detail as he was, a tedious legal proceeding was not a matter to which he had any professional objection.

"Yes?" said Norman.

"To begin with," explained the solicitor, "Mrs Villiers is bringing an action against you for restitution of conjugal rights."

Norman could not restrain rather a grim smile. The irony appeared almost grotesque.

"She will obtain an order," proceeded the lawyer, "which you will not obey; and that will con-

stitute legal desertion, and entitle her to proceed against you for divorce—on the grounds, of course, of desertion and adultery."

He said it in the same tone in which he had asked his client to take a seat.

"In regard to the latter," he added, "I understand there is at present no evidence beyond your own admission. The Court will decline to act upon that without corroboration." He cocked his eyeglass—and was it a smile that accompanied the action, or only a contortion of his features required to screw the monocle more effectually into position? "A few days at Brighton at this time of year would be a pleasant holiday," he said.

"I must be assured," said Norman, firmly, "that no name will be dragged into this case except my own."

"No doubt that can be avoided."

"It *must* be avoided," said Norman. "Otherwise I can take no step."

"It is a question for the other side," said Mr Spindle. "They are not likely to press it. You must understand I am not asking you to take any step."

"Quite so," said Norman. "I gather from what you have been saying that there will be two trials?"

"Precisely."

Norman hesitated. "Can you give me an idea of the probable cost?"

Mr Spindle did not like the question. It savoured of an economical spirit which was not grateful to him.

"The costs on our side," he said, "as the case is undefended, will not be considerable. Those of Mrs Villiers, of course, will be somewhat heavier."

"I shall have to pay them?"

"Oh, yes."

Norman had an idea that Mr Spindle might have to whistle a little longer than he would find to his taste.

"When is the action likely to be heard?" he asked.

Mr Spindle meditated. "The business of the Division is a good deal congested at present," he said, "but, with luck, we ought to get it through before the recess."

"That is?"

"Before August."

"And the divorce?"

"Oh," said Mr Spindle, vaguely, "hardly this year, I'm afraid."

He had risen. Evidently he considered the interview at an end: his mind had already flown to other subjects.

"I think that is all I can tell you at present, Mr Villiers," he said. "I will keep you informed of developments."

His client was scarcely out of the door before he had whistled up a tube beside his desk and was listening impatiently with his ear on the aperture.

Turning out of Bedford Row, Villiers descended into the billiard-rooms of the First Avenue Hotel. As he passed through the first room, he heard his name uttered in a low tone by a stranger, an experience frequent enough at one time, but not common of late. Formerly it had been wont to cause him slight, unreasoning annoyance; to-day it gave him distinct pleasure. It recalled the days of his early success. A perceptible thrill ran through him, and he went on into the principal room with his head higher and something of his old confident bearing. The condemned half of his book *should* be done again, and done well. He ordered a cup of coffee and some biscuits, and for an hour sat

and watched a game of billiards, feeling more spirit in him than he had done for weeks. Ambition, pride, self-respect returned upon him with a gush: he longed to get back among his fair sheets, his fingers ached to clutch the pen—fingers that shook as they raised the coffee-cup.

The exaltation continued during the drive home on the top of a 'bus; but it received something of a cold douche when he reached his room, in the shape of a letter from the second of his editors. That gentleman, like his confrère, regretted that he was not at present in a position to enter into negotiations upon the subject of a series of stories, but added that he should at all times be most happy to consider contributions from Mr Villiers; and, to acquaint him with the character of matter required, he had pleasure in enclosing a form of directions to authors, for his guidance. The form in question was a small printed slip, to this effect:

"Authors are courteously informed that only stories conforming to the following requirements can be considered for publication in the —— Magazine. The scene should be laid in Great Britain, at the present day. The hero should be

tall, good-looking, and not over thirty years of age. He should preferably be clean shaven, or, at least, wear only a moustache. The heroine should be under twenty-five and of attractive appearance. It is essential that the character, antecedents, and personal habits of each be beyond reproach: nothing in the nature of a 'past' can be entertained. The plot should avoid subjects of a questionable or debatable nature. In dealing with vice, the author should confine himself to murders, burglaries, assaults, and other similar forms accepted as unobjectionable by the public. Problems of sex, in any guise, are inadmissible. If it is necessary to touch upon religion, the characters should be made to attend the Church of England as a matter of course, and not in such a way as could suggest controversy. It is preferable that the story should move among people of good social position."

Norman crumpled this interesting document in his hand and threw it into the waste-paper basket. He wondered if he would ever sink so low as that. For the moment, however, it effected a heavy depression of his mental barometer, reacting upon the exceptional exhilaration of the last hour or two.

He was again face to face with the squalid and detestable question of ways and means. How much he had depended upon contributing this magazine matter he had not appreciated until the facility was denied. It was now almost four o'clock, and he suddenly realised that he was very tired. He sank wearily into a low chair and closed his eyes. It appeared only for a moment or two; but when he opened them again, Rosamond was standing over him. He had not heard her enter.

She sat down on the arm of his chair and rumpled her hand through his hair. "Do you know, Norman," she said, gently, "I'm beginning to get quite anxious about you. You've not been the least like yourself lately. There is something on your mind?"

Norman said nothing.

"Tell me," said Rosamond, a deeper note of tenderness in her voice; "tell me. Perhaps I can help you."

"What use to burden you with my troubles?" said Norman, taking the hand that lay on her lap. "Your pretty shoulders were not built for that."

She pressed his head close in to her. "Trust me, dear." There was a wonderful charm—almost a

caress—in Rosamond's soft utterance of words of endearment. She gave a sudden gay laugh. "Was I ever afraid to take 'the white man's burden'?"

Her spirits were infectious. Norman put an arm round her waist. "Dear little girl," he said, "you would cheer the most confirmed hypochondriac that ever breathed."

"At any rate, I should try," said Rosamond. "I hate melancholy people."

"Then I won't be melancholy, for your sake," said Norman, with sudden briskness. "Perhaps it's as well you should know," he added. "It may save you misunderstanding things. The truth is, Thornton's rejection of the book has been a blow to me in more ways than one. At present I don't see my way very clearly on the practical side of life."

"Do you mean you are hard up?" said Rosamond, plainly.

Norman nodded.

"What does that matter? You've got a gold mine here." She tapped his head. "You can draw a draft on sermon-paper that will be cashed at sight by any office that uses printing-ink."

"I've tried that" said Norman: "I've been liv-

ing on it for the last month. But it's a casual and unsatisfactory business. Besides, it needs a new and brilliant idea every time you put pen to paper; and ideas are not very exuberant with me just now, let alone brilliant ones. And I'm afraid, old girl, that the drafts you speak of by no means pass for coin of the realm in every quarter. I've had two letters from magazine editors to-day, declining me anything in the nature of continuous work of this sort. Still," he added, with a dry laugh, "I'm not entitled to say that there's no market for my work." He rummaged in the waste-paper basket for the "Directions to Authors," smoothed out the creases, and handed it to her. "That is one of the things I'm asked to produce."

Rosamond read the paper, and her face flushed hotly. She crushed it in her little hand and flung it into the grate.

"How dare he!" she cried.

"There is no personal disparagement implied," said Norman, mildly. "If Fielding were alive and were to send a tale dealing with realities to that magazine, it would be refused."

Rosamond said nothing more for a few minutes.

She picked abstractedly at some loose threads on the sleeve of Norman's coat.

"Dearest," she said softly, at last, "you mustn't let things of this sort worry you. Except that we are not conventional, and don't intend to be, you and I are one. And I'm making a splendid income —far more than I can possibly spend—over eight hundred a year."

The words had the effect of an electric shock upon Norman. He sprang to his feet.

"No!" he cried, fiercely. "No! I'll die, I'll rot beneath ten feet of clay, before it comes to that, Rosamond."

Rosamond was considerably startled. "What have I said?" she asked, in surprise. "Why have you suddenly flown into such a passion?"

"Oh, forgive me, dear," said Norman, recovering himself. "I don't mistake your sweet, loving generosity and kindness, Heaven knows. It is the dearest and truest offer you could make to me, and from my heart I thank you. But you know yourself—you feel it as much as I do—how impossible it is for me to accept it. You have always refused to take the smallest present from me. How can I,

then, not merely do that, but become dependent upon you for the very means of existence?"

"But if I were starving, I would let you provide for me," pleaded Rosamond.

"I doubt it," said Norman, looking at her closely. "Besides, I'm not starving"—he laughed a little bitterly—"not quite."

Rosamond moved towards him and laid a white hand on each of his shoulders. Then, stretching up, she brought her mouth to his and held it there.

"Darling!" she murmured, speaking close to his lips. "I love you for refusing. I love you for getting angry. It seems we can't defy conventions. The world is not old enough. As soon as you are divorced, I will marry you."

Norman felt the lingering touch of her lips long after she had gone, and the light warmth of her breath, and the soft caress of her bosom as it had pressed against him. Later on, during the evening, the effect of that sweet opiate wore off, and he returned upon himself with a shudder. Whatever faint mist had hitherto blurred the reflection he saw in his mental mirror was now wiped away. All his life he had looked upon no position as more unspeakably contemptible than that which would have

been his had he accepted Rosamond's offer. The only man whom he had ever declined to shake hands with was one whom he knew to occupy it.

The whole sordid business of gold and its equivalents, in connection with the tenderest and most exquisite of human relations, had always repelled him exceedingly. He heartily despised the woman who will take a kiss if it is accompanied by a present of commensurate magnitude; and he had little respect for the vast army of men who do the other sex the scant honour of supposing that the way to their hearts lies through their cupidity. And now, who was *he,* to respect or condemn, to criticise or cavil? These were but the ripples on the surface compared with the depths he had looked into. The cup of degradation, brimming with full measure, if he had not drunk, at least had been held to his lips till its sickly odour filled his nostrils.

He paced up and down his room in a torment of self-chastisement. *He must get back*—back to his old life, to his old self. And the way lay through three hundred manuscript pages. He made a feverish calculation. By slogging work he had sometimes done ten pages in a day. Thirty days,

at that rate, and it was finished. And he could live for a month!

The fit hot on him, he lighted his table-lamp and switched off the electric light; then went to a cupboard—the same from which Marjorie had extracted the *Sigea*—and took out the earlier, approved half of his manuscript. He threw it on the table and eagerly, hurriedly read through the last chapter. It was good; it was up to his standard: he would see that he didn't fall away. Then he took a clean sheet of paper. His pen stuck and spluttered in it. He threw away the sheet and took another, and with trembling fingers wrote "Chapter XVI." across the top of it.

CHAPTER XXIII

Six hours later, at two o'clock in the morning, Norman closed the door of No. 12 and crept across the landing to his own suite. The lamp had been smoking in his room, and the air was filled with the fumes of burnt oil. Except that it was covered with black smuts, the sheet on his table still contained nothing but the "Chapter XVI." at the top.

He placed his arms on the mantelpiece and leant heavily upon it, covering his eyes with his hands, partly to ease his aching head, partly to shut out his reflection in the mirror. Shall we condemn him as he stood there—broken, spiritless, physically ill, with haggard eyes, untidy hair, clothes cursorily and carelessly adjusted, all his high aspirations of six hours ago vanished into choking oil fumes? If we do, it will not be with half the fervour that he condemned himself. He wondered if anyone, since the world began, had hated himself with the absorbing strength that he did at that moment.

After a time he turned round and mixed himself some whisky-and-water, considerably stronger than he was accustomed to take it. His temperate use of alcohol at least had left him with the power to respond normally to the stimulant. The blood stirred in his veins; the depression on his spirit slightly lifted. What was he to do next? He could not sleep. Still less could he remain in that cheerless room, with its chilling reproach in every article his eyes rested upon. He took his hat and descended the stairs. Without any definite purpose in his mind, he quietly unbolted the main door and let himself out. The night was fine; a few stars shone above the long lines of roofs. His footsteps sounded hollow in the pervading stillness.

He turned north, through Kensington Gore, up Notting Hill to Paddington. He wandered aimlessly into the great station—almost silent now—then out again, and eastward along the Uxbridge Road. At the Marble Arch his steps once more took him northward, along the Euston Road, and up into Islington and Holloway. He knew not and cared not where he went. At times his mind ran riot, in a frenzy of self-hatred, alternating with periods of intense gloom, when he would walk for

a mile or more with his brain a dull, dead blank; feeling nothing, knowing nothing, striding mechanically on, on.

Some hours, it seemed to him, after he started, he found himself in Gray's Inn Road, facing south. The street was familiar, and he looked at his watch. It had stopped. He went on, across Holborn and the Strand, and, just as dawn was breaking, came out on the Embankment. Here he halted and leant heavily upon the parapet. A solitary policeman, moving slowly along, turned his light on him and passed on. Oh, how tired he was! He looked into the thick stream. Many had found rest there. His brain stirred, moved.—Many!—Many!

He had found his way to this spot by the purest chance, without any thought of suicide. The temptation came upon him unexpectedly, but with tremendous force. One moment it had not touched him; the next he was struggling in its spell, striving with all his might to close his ears to its subtly honeyed suggestions. Down in that slowly moving water there was no pain, only peace, peace and oblivion. And, surely, what else mattered? Why go on with the struggle? Why be subject, of your own free choice, to these violent human passions

that led to nothing but misery, both in the resistance and in the gratification? Who was there to regret him? Rosamond? For a few weeks, perhaps. Marjorie? He was lost to Marjorie in any case, and she would be happier a widow than divorced. He clung to the parapet. For the moment he seemed to be in the power of some external compelling force greater than his own.

At last, with a violent effort, he mastered himself and turned away. Who were they—these poor creatures who had gone before? Distraught servant-girls, frenzied lovers half mad from their birth. Not such as he—a man of the world, of intellect. A great writer! He held himself erect. A man who had moved the hearts, and stirred the blood, and swayed the minds of thousands of his fellowmen. No, he was not going to throw up the sponge. He could still get back. One day had been lost, only one. "Thirty days hath September, April, June and November." Not May; and it was May now: he could still do it in a month. He turned his flagging steps westward, homeward.

Passing through Pimlico, he met several groups of labourers starting for their work, with basses slung over their shoulders. He did not wish him-

self in their place—a cultured mind, however harassed, even by reason of that very culture, cannot deliberately wish itself debased—but he looked at them with some feeling akin to envy, as they hunched vigorously on their way, loudly proclaiming the paucity of their vocabulary by the monotonous and distressing, but not blasphemous, use of a single inappropriate adjective. Not one of them, probably, could write a grammatical sentence, but they were cheerful and contented; each of their days was rounded off, sufficient, complete. Life for them contained no weary straining after phrases, no lying awake in bed turning sentences—sentences that got wilder as the brain got wearier—no daily disappointment of unsatisfied ideals. Their work was done by time, and when the time was over, whatever had been born of it, peace, content, a day's work done; no worrying the night through that the corner of the brick was slightly out of plumb. Far other conditions applied to him. His was piece-work, and piece-work demanding always to be turned out of the finest temper under the pitiless surveillance of his own mind, which was taskmaster and workman in one, but whose critical faculty exceeded its productive, and which, illogically,

refused to be appeased by the utmost it could itself accomplish. It seemed to him, just then, that it would be a lighter task to lay bricks on mortar for ever than to write fifty thousand words in a month. Fagged out, he reached his rooms about seven o'clock and flung himself down on his bed, dressed as he was. He slept uneasily until the afternoon. About half-past six he rang for some dinner. It was the first food he had touched that day; but he was not hungry. He sometimes wondered if he should ever be hungry again. Subsequently he sat down at his writing-table. The smutted sheet was still on the blotting-pad, all smeared now from a housemaid's offices. He crushed it rather viciously into a ball and dropped it with relief into the waste-paper basket.

With infinite labour he wrote a page. Then he compared it with the corresponding page of the previous manuscript. With sickening depression he realised that it was worse than before. What was more, he knew that it *must* be worse. He was not fit to work. Suddenly it came over him that he was going to be ill. Something was thumping at the back of his head and his eyes felt like lead.

He glanced at the clock. It was after ten. It

had taken him two hours and a half to write a single page. Two hours and a half! And a page worse than the rejected of his friend Thornton! God, what was he coming to? He had not drawn the curtains, and the window in front of him reflected the room and himself, out of faintly luminous blackness, patterned in diamonds. He rested his elbows on the table and his cheeks in his hands and stared out, out—into the future.

He turned at the sound of a footstep. The door had opened and closed, and Rosamond had entered.

CHAPTER XXIV

ROSAMOND was wearing a soft dressing-gown of that delicate shade of mauve which she herself would have described as "conceived in its tenderest distress." It was slightly open at the front, revealing the frillings of her night-dress. She looked very lovely: her dark hair, caught up in a big bunch behind her head, contrasting with her white, firm throat; a bright glow in her soft eyes, a slight access of colour in her smooth cheeks.

"Working again!" she said, with simulated impatience. "Always working!"

"I've only just begun," said Norman, in a spiritless tone. "I was out all night."

"What were you doing?"

"Walking," said Norman, "walking—walking—walking."

"What a ridiculous thing to do in the middle of the night!" She gave a quick little laugh. "Where did you walk to? Come—make room. I want you to nurse me."

Norman pushed his chair back obediently, but with an effort that made his head throb more violently and started a drumming in his ears. Rosamond squeezed between him and the table and perched upon his knee. He put his arm round her half mechanically, with a slight sigh, more of physical weariness than of content. But at the touch of her supple form, innocent of corset, separated from his arm only by the softest and thinnest of coverings, the blood leapt to his cheek; and Rosamond knew it. Ill as he was, worn out body and spirit, his nerves flagged, jaded, almost atrophied, lost to all feeling but that ceaseless thudding in his head, the sense of sex still answered to the call upon it, still jumped at the spur, like an outridden horse.

She nestled close in to him happily. "Where did you walk to?" she asked again, resting her cheek upon his thick hair.

"Oh, I hardly know," said Norman. "I went to lots of stations—St Pancras, King's Cross."

"Good gracious, why?"

"To see the trains start," said Norman, dully: "the night expresses. It's rather interesting."

"You went from here to St Pancras in the middle

of the night to see the trains start!" Rosamond laughed incredulously, and gave his head an affectionate, scolding shake between her soft palms. She little knew what pain it caused him. "You must think of a better reason than that, old boy."

Then, apparently fancying she might be misunderstood, she clasped her arms tenderly about him and held him close. "Oh, I trust you, dear." And again there was that exquisite low caress in the last word.

Norman said nothing. He wondered rather vaguely why this gentle expression of her faith in him touched him so little. He knew he was glad—must be glad—and yet somehow the power to feel it was not in him. Rosamond lazily picked up the sheet of paper from his blotting-pad and read it through.

"What is this you've been writing?" she asked in a tone of surprise. "You dear old donkey, it's awful rubbish."

"Yes," said Norman, wearily, "it's very bad."

"You must never laugh at my modistese again," she went on merrily, "if this is how you have taken to write yourself."

"Is it as bad as that?" said he, without the least intention to be offensive.

Again she shook that poor head. "Wretch!" she exclaimed. "At any rate, tell me what you mean by 'expecionally'?"

"Have I written that? 'Exceptionally,' I suppose."

"Or 'especially'? Shall I alter it?" She took Norman's pen in her hand, still sitting on his knee, and bent over the table. "Quickly, which is it to be?"

"Either," said Norman, listlessly. Why couldn't he think? What was the context? Heavens! what was the book about?

" 'Especially,' then." She made the correction. "It will save the compositor a tremendous lot of anxiety, won't it?"

She nestled back into his arms. "You're not up to it, Norman," she said, gently. "What's the good of trying to write when you're so tired? You'll only make yourself ill."

"I don't feel very fit," said Norman, putting his hand to his head.

"Of course you don't." She caressed him softly. "You've worn yourself out. How stupid of you

to walk about all night! I wouldn't write fiction if it made me do things of that kind." She gave a little laugh. "Doing dress isn't very lofty, perhaps, but it lets you sleep at night."

"I couldn't do dress," said Norman, quite seriously. "Men don't wear dresses. And what they do wear they find out about somehow, without reading it in the papers."

Rosamond pressed his head into the laces of her bosom. "Rest there, tired head," she said; then blushed and laughed a little, and added softly, "for the present."

Norman felt easier so. That rush of blood to the head at the first touch of Rosamond had not been suffered with impunity. Every vein in it was now beating like a sledge-hammer. But Rosamond's bosom was soft, and it soothed him to rest it there. If that could have been his eternal pillow, from which his throbbing head would not lift again, he would peacefully, gladly have accepted it as such.

But Rosamond had no such thoughts. It must be said, in justice to her, that she had no conception how ill he was.

"You are always so cheerless here," she said,

looking round; "a horrid lamp, and no fire, and no nice chairs. Let us go into my room and be comfortable. You shall have some champagne to pick you up."

Norman raised his head, startled back to realities by a sudden anxiety, a sudden remembrance. "Oh, not to-night, dear," he said, quickly—pleading. "I must get on. I can't stop. I've only thirty days. 'Thirty days hath September—' "

"Why! what on earth are you talking about?" said Rosamond, half laughing, but with a perceptible note of latent concern. "Work, you old goose! You're no more fit to work than—well, than I am just now." She pressed her cheek to his face. The laugh overcame the concern and took that moving note, partly joyous and partly shy, which is woman's highest tribute and man's sweetest privilege.

Norman had lost the thread of his thoughts and was wearily striving to pick it up again.

"What a solemn old stupid you are to-night!" cried Rosamond.

Suddenly she sprang from him with a gay, chaffing ripple of laughter. "Come," she said.

Norman slowly turned in his chair; his head lifted; his breath came fast.

Rosamond, mercy! mercy!

There was a pause. Norman's hand moved uncertainly to his eyes. He no longer felt his head —it had dulled into painlessness—but the action of turning had cast a black mist over his eyes, hiding everything. Then, slowly, the mist moved, swayed, opened; and he saw Rosamond like a picture thrown by limelight on a screen—superb; standing at her full height; her head held slightly back; the attitude moulding in relief every line and curve of her beautiful figure. The laces at her throat had fallen away, revealing the vale of her bosom. Her arms were hanging a little forward and open, the palms turned to the front. She stretched them towards him. Then she smiled. "Come," she said again, a melting softness in the lingering tone.

Perhaps then, at last, Rosamond knew. Perhaps in that final moment—in those vaguely moving hands—the consciousness of what she was doing broke upon her. She must have realised it before, had not the lamp-shade been so tilted as to cast the light upon the manuscript and off Norman's face.

At any rate, she retreated a step and put up her hands to keep him back.

It was too late. Norman had already risen—his face pale, his hands trembling, a heavy perspiration thick on his brow. For an instant he clung to the chair-back for support, then pushed it away with such force that it fell with a crash on the floor. In two strides he crossed the space that separated him from Rosamond, and for a moment clasped her, strained her in his arms. A moment only. The next he had tottered and fallen forward, almost dragging her with him, and lay huddled on the pale green carpet, blood pouring from his mouth.

Oh, man, man! keep away your meddling, officious hands! Leave these things to God. His eternal justice is sure.

CHAPTER XXV

AND His eternal mercy.

For six weeks Norman Villiers hung on the brink of the unknown. Most of those heavy days were passed in darkness; but from time to time there came gleams of semi-consciousness, during which he had fleeting glimpses of passing events and of some people who interested him. There was a tall man with a big nose he saw occasionally, who wore glasses and couldn't keep his long, hard fingers off him. He had a quiet voice. He knew him well enough; he was one of his old schoolmasters; but evidently he didn't appreciate the fact that he was no longer dealing with a boy, who could be squashed and ignored. It was rather absurd. He should have to tell him some day.

And now and then a beautiful woman came, with dark hair and soft dark eyes, who wore pretty dresses and generally had some flowers. He seemed to have known her long ago. He couldn't

quite remember who she was. And then there were two nurses in uniform, who hung about him a good deal and occasionally rather worried him.

Sometimes they appeared to be nurses; at other times they seemed to be friends he had known in the past and forgotten, or had thought to be dead. One—the elder of the two—who had a kind face and soft hands, particularly troubled him at first, because of the strange familiarity of her features and ways. He felt inclined to laugh, one day, when he remembered that they were his mother's, and that he hadn't recognised her. She, too, he had supposed to be dead. She was very gentle, his mother. Strange that he had thought her dead! He was very glad to find he was wrong, because he had sometimes feared that he hadn't returned her loving acts and thoughts as he should have done, and now he could make up for it. But why would she persist in answering him as though he were a child still, talking stupidly? Didn't she know he was a famous man? Hadn't she heard? He would *make* her understand. Then hands were placed over him, and he was pressed back upon his pillows, and the darkness returned.

But at last there came a day—a bright morning

in July—when he opened sane eyes and looked about him. It was his own room at Albany Mansions that his eyes fell upon—a soft breeze stirring the curtains at the open windows—and not the bare little bedroom he had occupied for three years at school, nor yet a certain heavily hung apartment of an old country-house, of odd shape and creepy suggestion, in which he had once slept a night. Though there was every indication that someone had recently been with him, for the moment he was alone. But even as he was weakly wondering who it could have been, there was a quick rustle of skirts and the door opened.

Rosamond came in like a beam of sunshine, in a light summer gown, with a big basket of roses in her hand. She walked straight across to the window, without looking at him, and began to arrange the flowers in a bowl of water standing on the table beneath it. Presently she chanced to look round and met his eyes watching her. She stood quite still, two roses held between the fingers of her right hand. Startled gladness, hope, were in her look, but she spoke a little fearfully.

"Norman, do you know me? Do you know me, dear?"

"Of course, I know you," said Norman. "Could I ever forget you, Rosamond?"

His voice was weak, and somehow the sentiment didn't ring quite true; but the words were rational enough and uttered perfectly calmly.

Rosamond took a quick step towards him; her hand went to her heart. "Oh, I'm glad," she said, "so glad, so thankful!"

She drew a chair to his bedside and sat down.

"What beautiful roses!" said Norman. He stretched out a thin hand to her. "How good you have been to me!"

"I haven't," said Rosamond. She took the hand in her left; the right still held the two roses. "I've been to see you occasionally and brought you flowers. That's all."

Norman looked at some needlework and an open book which were lying on a small table by the window.

She followed the direction of his glance. "They belong to one of the nurses. I wasn't born to be a sister of charity, Norman," she said, rather contritely. "I'm afraid I like well men very much better than sick ones."

A sudden thought had flashed through Norman.

He gripped her hand with all the feeble strength he had left. "Who has paid for the nurses?" he asked, sharply. "Who has paid for everything?"

Rosamond was silent.

He struggled wildly to raise himself, his face burning. "Rosamond! Rosamond!"

She put her hands upon his shoulders and easily forced him back upon the pillows.

"Don't be so angry," she said, softly. "You'll make yourself ill again. I couldn't let you die. And you'll be able to pay me back when you're better and can work. Besides, it was really to save myself having to nurse you. I don't like nursing."

"You couldn't have done that in any case," said Norman, weakly, pressing his head into the pillow. He had no strength to struggle. "I've been much too bad, I know that. I fancy I've been a bit delirious at times. You've brought me back to life, dear. For that I am your debtor always, after the money has been repaid. If I'm going to get better," he added, with a tired sigh.

"Of course, you'll get better," said Rosamond, quickly. "You're better now."

"More or less," said Norman, smiling faintly. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Nearly six weeks," she replied.

"As long as that! It seems only a few days. What a nuisance I must have been! What does the doctor say about me?" he asked suddenly.

"That you're to keep quiet and get well," said Rosamond. She began rather hastily to straighten the coverings upon him.

"Yes, I know that," said Norman, not to be put off. "What else?"

Rosamond didn't answer for a moment or two. Then she took his hand again and looked at him calmly. "He says if you are careful you may live to be an old man—"

"Yes?"

"That's all," said Rosamond, firmly.

"It's not all," said Norman. "Didn't he say, by any chance, that I had broken down too badly to travel above the legal pace again?"

"He thinks you may always be—"

"A semi-invalid?" said Norman.

Rosamond said nothing, and after a pause Norman added: "Well, we have lived, dear. I don't repine. I've had my day."

Rosamond bowed her head. "It was my fault," she said.

"No, no." He stroked her hand with one whiter than hers. "I ate too much of the cake, it was so good, and it has given me indigestion." He tried to laugh, but the effort was too great, and he settled himself wearily upon the pillows.

There was a long silence. A nurse came in and, finding her patient conscious, gave him some food out of a spoon. He took it meekly. Then, cautioning Rosamond not to let him talk too much, she left them alone again.

Rosamond had something to say, however, which she thought would conduce to the ultimate benefit of his health far more than present silence. She fondled his hand for a few moments.

"Norman, may I write to your wife?" she said abruptly.

A trembling hope flickered for a moment in Norman's heavy eyes and then died out again, like the distant flash of a search-light on the sea.

Rosamond saw it and it gave her a stab, but she stuck bravely to her purpose. "Don't think I'm suggesting it because I'm tired of you and want to get rid of you now that you're ill," she went on quickly; "though it looks like it," she added, with a laugh that was half a sob. "It's not that, dear."

She snatched up his wasted hand and pressed it closely, tenderly, to her lips. "Night after night, and day after day, since you've been ill, I've thought about you—about you both—and the future. And she is still willing to take you back."

"How do you know that?" said Norman, quickly.

She shook her head at him a little wistfully. "You're very willing to go, dear," she said. "I've no reason for knowing, except the feminine one: because I do. But you can trust it in this case; it's founded on observation, and intuition, and on something else, perhaps, that it isn't necessary to mention." Again that little laugh that was caught in her throat. "I assure you, it's quite a sound one."

Norman sank back with a sigh—he had strained a little upward. "She has not been here, then, or written?"

"I don't think she knows."

He closed his eyes wearily and then opened them again. "I can't ask her, Rosamond," he said; "it's out of the question. What have I to offer?" He looked at his hands. "A wreck: a husband to nurse, more or less, for the rest of his life. Besides, she

is suing for divorce. Has anything been done? Has the case been heard?"

"Yes, the case has been heard," said Rosamond, "and an order has been made against you for restitution of conjugal rights." She checked a sigh, and added brightly: "Really, Norman, I think you ought to obey the order of the Court."

"That is only a legal fiction," said Norman. "I rejected her when I was well and prosperous. I can't ask her to take the remains of me now—an invalid who could be nothing but a burden."

Rosamond said no more. He was too weak to be further urged just then. Already the strain of the conversation had plainly told upon his small reserve of strength.

The two roses she had been holding in her hand when she first found him conscious had fallen on the bed. One was deep pink, with very large smooth petals; the other, a delicate shell-pink tea-rose. Rosamond picked them up again.

"Where did you get all these marvellous roses?" said Norman, looking from her to the bowl. "I never saw such beauties."

"I had to go to the Temple Show yesterday," she replied, "to look at the dresses; so I bought

them for you; they took a first prize. I don't wonder." She pressed the two in her hand to her face. "I love them. Especially this." She held up the larger, deep-coloured one. " 'Mrs W. J. Grant.' Isn't she magnificent? You shall have her beside you."

She took a glass from the mantelpiece and filled it with water; then placed it, with the rose in it, on a small table at his bedside.

"I'm going to steal the other one," she announced, "and wear it to celebrate your recovery. What is it called?" She looked at the name on it. " 'Maman Cochet.' Oh, mamma, you're very pretty; much too pretty, mamma!"

She pinned it in her bodice.

"And now for a pilgrimage of the shops," she said, with a small grimace. "Oh, how I hate them!"

She turned at the door to look back at him brightly. "Be good. Obey the nurses. And no more attempts to sit up, please." She included the glowing rose in a final smiling glance. " 'Mrs W. J. Grant' is my substitute till I return."

CHAPTER XXVI

After Rosamond left him Norman slept for some hours. When he awoke late in the afternoon, he was aware, even before his eyes were quite open, that there was someone in the room—a woman seated by the window, bending over some work. He supposed it was Rosamond.

Was it Rosamond? Slight, sloping shoulders demurely bent, brown hair pulled back from a thin, white brow to a big roll behind, a small pointed profile, two earnest eyes calmly intent upon their work? Norman looked and looked, and his heart beat an answer to the question. He waited in silence, drinking long, grateful drafts from the spring of renewed life and hope, almost afraid the figure would look up and break the spell.

At last he spoke. "Is that Marjorie?" he said, in a voice that was still the ghost of what it had been, "or an angel from heaven?"

Marjorie got up. "It's not an angel, Norman," she said, "so I suppose it must be Marjorie."

"How good of you to come!" was all he could say.

"Of course I've come," said Marjorie. "I should have come long ago if I'd known. I only heard this morning. Mr Thornton found out by accident and wrote and told James. He pretended he wanted him to go and play golf, and mentioned your illness as a sort of something to fill up. I always liked Mr Thornton," she added, inconsequently.

"So did I," said Norman.

Marjorie bent over him to smooth his pillows, keeping her face hidden. "We must see more of him when you're better," she said.

There was scarcely a perceptible change in her voice. Norman could not speak. And when Marjorie had at length completed the adjustment of the pillows, which appeared to have got into rather troublesome disarray, she saw tears standing in each of his eyes. Her heart leapt: she could have sung, shouted. One would have guessed it as little, as that she had prolonged her previous manipulation for his comfort because she dreaded to seek in his

face the answer to the most momentous question of her life. Now that the field was won after so many weary months, she danced on her joy, played with it, with a face which reflected but the faintest gleam of that inward revel.

"Norman, the Court has ordered you to return to me," she said, severely. "Do you know that?"

Norman admitted that an echo of such a sentence had reached his ears.

"Do you intend to obey it? It's a serious affair to disobey the Court, you know."

He stretched out his two thin hands to her. "Marjorie, Marjorie, will you *let* me obey it, after all?"

She dropped on her knees by his bedside. "I would let you," she said, softly, "if fifty years had gone past since you went away, and you were an old man with furrows on your face"—she traced the hypothetical lines with her finger—"and all this hair was white." She tenderly brushed the straggling strands from his forehead and then, bending over, touched it softly with her lips.

"But you know," said Norman, "you know, dear, you are doing a wretched bad deal with fortune. She offers you freedom and a fresh start, and

you come back to an invalid. The doctor says I shall always be pretty much of a crock."

"What do I care?" cried Marjorie. She spread her arms over him. "I shall give up my life to nursing you and taking care of you and bringing you back to health."

Norman laid his hand on her head. "I think it *was* an angel that came," he said softly.

They talked for a long time in low tones. They had such a lot to say. It was a conversation in regard to which it is only possible to record, from the far corner of the room to which we have discreetly retreated, that it was punctuated with a good many "hushes" from Marjorie, when her husband showed signs of unduly exerting himself. She knew he ought not to be talking at all, but those eight months had been such heavy ones, and how could she help it?

At last she jumped up, struck by a sudden thought, blank contrition on her face, which hardly admitted the smile beneath. "Oh, dear, I've forgotten all about James and the children! He was going to take them for a drive and then call for me." She went to the window and put her head

out. "There they are! Poor darlings, I wonder how long they've been waiting?"

"Does that include James?" said Norman, with a smile.

Marjorie hurried to the door and down the steps. A cab was drawn up outside, and James was standing on the pavement talking to the commissionnaire.

"I want you to go and get me some things," she said, breathlessly. "I'm not going back."

Then James did an astonishing thing. He took her whole-heartedly in his arms and kissed her. Which was rather embarrassing to poor Marjorie, seeing that he hadn't so honoured her since her wedding day, particularly as the cabman was glancing over his shoulder, and the commissionnaire wasn't glancing over his shoulder at all, but staring straight at them.

"A bottle of '63 to-night," he said, joyously; "and it's your fault if I suffer for it."

"Oh, dear, I hope you won't," said Marjorie, almost with genuine concern. "I want the children."

The two little ladies were sitting side by side on the small seat of the cab, with their backs to the horse, their diminutive toes dangling; quietly talk-

ing together in that wonderful, serious way that children have of talking when left to themselves, and now and then digging inquisitive, speculative fingers into sundry parcels that strewed their laps and the seat opposite. A drive with Uncle James was an event which obviously contained many interesting possibilities.

"What are all those parcels?" said Marjorie.

"Groceries," said James, mendaciously: "odds and ends for Marion. Can't you keep that whip still?" he yelled to the cabman, who was harmlessly flicking his horse. "Is the poor beast never to be free from it, even when he's standing still?"

Marjorie got the children out of the cab and ran upstairs with them, holding one by each hand. Her own steps felt so light that she forgot their small feet; and so, by the time they reached the second floor, the little people were sadly out of breath. She hugged them in turn to make up for her thoughtlessness, straightened their hats, and then took them with her into Norman's room.

They ran towards him joyfully.

"Oh, Daddy!" cried the elder. "Poor Daddy! Good Daddy!"

"No, darlings," said the invalid, quietly, taking

a hand of each. "Poor Daddy, if you will have it so, but not good Daddy—as long as you live."

Marjorie didn't let them stay long. After a few minutes she took them down again, chattering volubly, and packed them in the cab with James—a happy party. During the drive home the latter employed the intervals of congratulating himself upon his success in bringing about a joyful *dénouement* with which he had had nothing whatever to do, in working himself into an ungovernable rage, with which adequately to meet the situation which he foresaw when the children triumphantly opened their parcels before Marion.

After she had seen the cab drive away Marjorie ascended the stairs again; but this time without hurry, peacefully, with a deep content in her heart. It gave her a shock to remember it was the same flight she had mounted with such different feelings seven months before, clad in the cream cloth gown and ostrich plumes which had proved so sadly inefficacious.

Norman found it very delicious, when she returned to his room, to renew acquaintance with her easy, tranquil method of going about the affairs of life; to observe the unobtrusive but confident air

which which she assumed control of the sick-room, giving orders to the nurses quietly and as a matter of course, as if she had engaged them herself. Thinking of the nurses, it crossed his mind, with a private chuckle, that he should have to ask her to draw him a considerable cheque before long. He knew precisely how she would do it: with as little concern and as little question as she would write an order for the stores; and that an hour or two afterwards it would occur to her to ask him what it was for.

In much the same way, it did, presently, occur to her to refer to another subject.

"What a splendid lot of roses you've got!" she said. "Where did they come from?"

Norman made no response; and perhaps she guessed. At any rate, she didn't press the question.

"I don't like imperial pink," she said, glancing at the large flower by his bedside. "It's not at all soothing. I'll get you another to look at."

She dipped her fingers among the perfumed mass in the bowl, and, after a little hesitation, picked out a pure white tea.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said, holding it up. "It

has its name on it: 'Innocente Pirola.' What an appropriate one!"

Norman watched her in silence while she took away the pink rose and put the white one in its place.

THE END

THE YOKE

BY HUBERT WALES

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